

On Charges of Cultural Appropriation
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Over the past 5 or 6 years the majority of my research has been directed toward exploring the 1st century social context. In particular, the context of Roman views about sex and how they relate to Paul's theology.

The claim is often made that Christian sexual ethics are based on an outdated model appropriated from ancient cultures that were patriarchal and misogynist. Since many of the Biblical passages about sexual ethics come from the apostle Paul, Paul himself is obviously a bigot, a man filled with prejudice and sexism, and blinded by the age and culture that produced him. He was simply incapable of thinking outside the box about relations between men and women.

I heard that accusation made by university students when I was given a chance to lecture about sexual ethics at Iowa State University. It is what the kids were being taught by their professors.

While, as I said, the majority of my research involved questions about sexual ethics, there is a definite overlap between sexual ethics and our discussions about the order of creation.

The thrust of my presentation today seeks to address the question, Was Paul simply a product of his times? Was he so shaped by the mindset of the status quo so that he couldn't imagine different relations between the sexes than that defined for him by his culture? If all Paul was doing was parroting the teachers of his day, then the opponents of the order of creation who accuse Paul of cultural appropriation might have a bone on which to chew. If on the other hand, Paul's views on male and female were different than prevailing views, then the liberal charges against him collapse.

Sociologically, Paul was the product of two dominant cultures. In Acts (23:6) Paul claims to be a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. He wasn't just Jewish. He was a PK (Pharisee's Kid) who began his training in theology while growing up in a very religious family. A chapter earlier he told the people, "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today." (Acts22:3) So he was zealous for the religion taught him by the rabbis.

He tells the Romans he was "an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham of the tribe of Benjamin." (Rom. 11:1) Time and again Paul emphasized his Jewish upbringing. If anyone was shaped by a rabbinical Jewish faith, it was Paul. Score one for those accusing Paul of being a brain-washed product of his culture.

It is necessary to ascertain what the rabbinical view on the relation between the sexes was that Paul would have been taught and which he then, consequently, would have adopted.

The first written code of rabbinical teaching was the Mishnah, written in the late 2nd century. The Mishnah represented the oral tradition of the rabbis dating back to the days of Paul and well before. Other sources of rabbinical teaching include, the Tosephta, a commentary on the Mishnah written in the 3rd century. The Jerusalem Talmud being written in the 5th century, and the Babylonian Talmud, which is the more authoritative Talmud in the 6th century. Both of which are again commentaries on the Mishnah. Though these sources were written well after Paul, they do record Jewish oral tradition that can safely be assumed to be prevalent in Paul's day.

These sources present conflicting messages with regard to how the rabbis interpreted God's will for the sexes. Overall, one can say that they espouse a view that is extremely male centric and does not treat women as equally important in the eyes of God or equally valuable in the home.

The Babylonian Talmud sums up a fundamental view of the relation between men and women by stating that women are "a separate people." (Shabbat 62a)

That “separateness” is manifest in women’s exclusion from the public sphere, their unequal protection under the law – particularly with regard to marriage, and the general attitudes about their feminine character. All of which are elements coloring rabbinical views on the order of creation.

One can grant that there are examples in the rabbinical tradition that speak to a husband’s love for his wife/wives; such as Sanhedrin 76a in the Talmud,

“One **who loves his wife as he loves himself, and who esteems her** by giving her clothing and jewelry **more than he esteems himself, . . .** ensures that his home will be devoid of quarrel and sin”

It’s not exactly a rabbinical command to love one’s wife, but it at least acknowledges that loving one’s wife will help alleviate tension in the home. Another text within the Talmud states that husbands ought not to impose excessive fear on their households by ruling them with too much severity. (Gittin 6b) So there is at least an acknowledgment that headship is not an excuse for abuse.

Polygamy is assumed through the rabbinical texts. In fact, the Mishnah claims that it is acceptable for men to have multiple wives but not women to have more than one husband because the law to be fruitful and multiply was given to men, not women. It further states that if a wife does not produce an heir for her husband within 10 years the husband is encouraged to take a 2nd wife.

Indeed, the concept that the law does not apply to women in the same degree as men is implicit throughout rabbinical writings. It’s not just that the law might define different roles or vocations for women, as we would teach, but that law isn’t really meant for women in the same way as it is for men.

An example. Whereas Deut. 11:19 reads:

“Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ¹⁹ You shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

A Jewish Midrash on this passage states:

“And you shall teach them to your sons to speak in them”: and not to your daughters – whom they ruled: (Piska 46, Sifrei Devarim)

In traditional Judaism women did not study the Torah. There was no need for it since the men were required to study it and they, not the women, would establish religion within the home.

Negative attitudes toward women in the rabbinical record are found throughout the texts.

In the Tosephta, one finds the following;

“Rabbi Judah says: There are three Benedictions which one must say every day: Blessed be He who did not make me a Gentile; Blessed be He who did not make me an uneducated man. Blessed be He who did not make me a Gentile. All the nations (Gentiles) are as nothing before Him. Blessed be He who did not make me a woman, for a woman is under no obligation to keep the commandments. Blessed be He who did not make me an uneducated person, for no uneducated person fears sin.”

The Babylonian Talmud (AD 500) states:

“A daughter is a vain treasure to her father: through anxiety on her account, he cannot sleep at night. As a minor, lest she be seduced; in her majority, lest she play the harlot; as an adult, lest she be not married; if she marries, lest she bear no children; if she grows old, lest she engage in witchcraft! But the Rabbis have said the same: The world cannot exist without males and females; happy is he whose children are males, and woe to him whose children are females.”

The not-so-thinly veiled message is that women are more problem than blessing, and while they are necessary for procreation, they are not really on the same level as men.

When it comes to protection under the law in cases of divorce, women were at the mercy of their husbands . Quoting the Mishnah:

“The school of Shammai says: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, because he has found in her indecenty in anything. And the school of Hillel say He may divorce her even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, because he has found in her indecenty in anything. Rabbie Akiba says; Even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written, and it shall be that if she find no favour in his eyes.”

This was the debate into which the Pharisees tried to drag Jesus in Matthew 19.

Judith Romney Wegner, author of “Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah” (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988) writes:

“From the standpoint of women’s personhood, the most conspicuous feature of these rules (regarding marriage and divorce) is their one-sidedness. The wife’s lack of corresponding rights against the husband reflect a polygynous system in which the wife is the husband’s exclusive sexual property, but the reverse is not the case.”

We could go on with more examples, but the point seems clear that ancient rabbinical views on the roles of the sexes within the order of creation is something significantly different than what Paul taught.

If Paul was simply a product of his Jewish roots and was repeating the biases of his formative culture then one would expect him to present an image of the relationship between man and woman that was repressive and negative toward women; one that favored polygamy, that made the woman the sexual property of the man, that encouraged unequal expectations under the law, and that did not emphasize the need for love within the marriage.

The other cultural mother of Paul was Roman culture. In Acts 22, Paul claims his Roman citizenship in order to avoid being scourged by Roman soldiers. There, it is even stated that he was born a Roman citizen. So how could a Jew, the son of a Pharisee, be born a Roman citizen? The options are limited. Either one could buy one’s citizenship which was extremely expensive and highly unlikely for your average Jewish Pharisee; or, the other was to be gifted citizenship. For instance, slaves could be given citizenship by being especially good slaves and pleasing their master. That seems a more plausible explanation for Paul’s citizenship. His father was probably under Roman servitude at one point and was freed. Paul as the son of a freedman would automatically have been considered a Roman citizen.

Being a Roman citizen also means Paul had unique access to the Roman Empire that the other disciples did not enjoy. His being the apostle to the Gentiles makes perfect sense, because those Gentiles were all part of the Roman Empire. Paul knew Roman culture. He knew the Roman mind. He moved about freely throughout Roman territory. Every congregation he founded was on Roman soil. So it seems plausible that Paul’s views on sex and marriage would have been influenced, not just by Jewish, but also by Roman culture.

How then, would your average Roman have viewed the relationship between the sexes?

To say simply that Roman culture was patriarchal is a huge understatement. Roman culture was not just dominated by male leaders, the entire culture was about male domination. The ideal Roman male was strong in his mind and body. Romans considered themselves to be masters of the world by divine right. They were to be dominant in all their dealings. Women were soft and weak. In fact, the Greek word used in the New Testament to describe homosexuality which is “*malakos*” or “soft,” is the equivalent to the Latin word “*mollis*” used in Roman culture to refer to men who played the women in sexual relations. The word “soft” for the Romans was not all that different than the word “gay” in our culture. Manly men were not soft. They were dominant and hard. If you look at the Roman sculpture and art of Paul’s day, you see the Roman ideal male as heavily muscled and powerful. Power had little room for mercy and expressed itself in cruelty.

Men took what men wanted, to the point of breaking those who got in their way. They dominated on the battle field and in the bedroom. There is not much room in such a culture for feminine qualities.

Marriage in Roman culture was where the rubber met the road in the relation between the sexes. It was not a monolithic institution. There were various “shades” of marriage if you will. Some marriages were what might be considered today to be “open” marriages [Otto Kiefer, *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Dorest Press, 1993), 8.], while others were more traditionally monogamous. In marriage a woman was either given “into the hand” of her husband who then assumed legal authority over her, or she could remain in the hand of her father who then retained his role as her legal authority.

Women were not equals with men in marriage. Once married, a woman was expected to be sexually monogamous with her husband. There are many examples of female infidelity in the Roman world of course. But the consequences for a wife’s infidelity were severe, Caesar Augustus even legally mandated that a woman caught in adultery must be divorced at a minimum, or their husbands could be charged with pimping. If a husband killed his adulterous wife his punishments were not to be severe. At other points in Roman history a man could kill his adulterous wife without any consequences, in fact it was expected. Woman faced the real possibility of death for adultery, men did not. And while women were to remain sexually faithful to their husbands, husbands had social leeway to engage in intercourse outside the marriage. If he had slaves, it was understood that he could and probably would have intercourse with whichever of them caught his fancy, male or female alike. He was also likely to engage prostitutes.

The purpose of marriage was not necessarily to express love, but to establish equitable relations between families, or for the purpose of raising children. Tacitus is said to have written that “The true Roman married without love and loved without refinement or reverence.” [Kiefer, 25] The woman was not bound to her husband by affection, but by legal arrangement. She was often the manager of the house and the house slaves, which freed the man to engage in more important work outside the home. Not surprisingly there are texts complaining about how cruel some women were their house slaves, punishing severely for minor issues. Roman culture as a whole was cruel.

The primary value of a wife was rooted in her ability to produce heirs. And yet, many Roman women saw children as an inconvenience. The large numbers of infant bones found in ancient Roman sewers suggest as much, as does Caesar Augustus’ legislation known as the “*Lex Popia Poppaea*” which granted special rewards to families with 3 or more children. Couples had to be bated with promises of financial reward to have multiple children.

While occasionally finding ancient texts lauding womanly virtue, women were treated as little more than chattel. Their purpose was to have children and render affection according to their men’s desires. Certain Roman marriage rites, included the new bride willingly sitting on the phallus of a fertility god, to give herself sexually to the gods before giving herself to her husband on their wedding night. She lived to please him sexually, not to be pleased.

Some say that Roman culture was pro family and pro-marriage - that they, in fact, advanced marriage from the Greeks. It is true that Greek wives, had rooms in their homes where they were virtual prisoners and forbidden from going out in public. They were also deprived of education. So yes, Greek women had it worse. Roman wives shared meals with their husbands at the table. They enjoyed a level of education aimed at practical knowledge. They could leave home on their own provided they wore the long matron’s dress. It was an improvement over the Greeks.

Roman laws also gave women rights they did not have in previous centuries. In early Rome, a husband had to prove his wife had either committed adultery, drunk wine, or was perverse and disgusting in conduct. [Kiefer 30] in order to divorce her. So the law forbade men from simply divorcing their wives for no reason. Yet, under the law, there were no legitimate recognized reasons for a wife to pursue a divorce from her husband. So the treatment of women under the law was not equal.

One might therefore conclude that Rome was pro-family and pro-marriage. But this is only in comparison to the Greeks before them. By Christian standards Roman marriage was hardly an institution to be copied.

Just a few more comments on the Roman view of women.

Livy wrote how in 131 B.C a speech was given by a Roman censor that sated the following,

“If we could live without wives we should not have all this trouble. Since nature has brought it about that we can neither live with them in peace nor without them at all, we must ensure eternal benefit rather than temporary pleasure.” [Kiefer 34]

So the expression, “you can’t live with them or without them” dates back to Roman times. As does the expression of the wife being “the old ball and chain.”

Women lived under the authority of the *pater familias*. They had absolutely no political rights.

If Paul’s views were shaped his exposure to Roman culture we would expect that his approach to marriage and the relation between the sexes would reflect at least some of these Roman understandings. He should, under this view, express a strong and unyielding male domination over women. He should see women as having no legal rights over their husbands in the eyes of God, and teach that women were biological necessities for procreation but not necessarily important compared to their husbands.

If the arguments of the left on correct, then both Jewish and Roman views about the relation between men and women should have been driving Paul’s teachings on the order of creation.

But the doctrine Paul taught was not consistent with either cultural view. Christianity proclaimed a completely different dynamic between the sexes than any other culture of the day.

It afforded a new and even radical dignity to womanhood.

Often, all the opponents of the order of creation point to are the restrictions placed on women by Paul. Women are to submit to their husbands because the husband is the head of the home, women should not occupy the office of pastor; they should not publically teach men in the church. Because the order of creation does not permit women to fill all the roles God has given men, opponents claim that it is oppressive and sexist. They ignore the elements of the order of creation that grant dignity and importance to womanhood. They ignore the value God places on women and the absolute equality of grace and mercy shown to the sexes. There is no hint in Paul’s theology that women are less than men because they occupy different roles and vocations, and this was a radical departure from the Roman and Jewish cultures of Paul’s day.

Consider 1 Cor. 7:2-4

² Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. [καὶ ἐκάστη τὸν ἴδιον ἄνδρα ἐχέτω] ³ Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, [τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἀποδιδότω] and likewise also the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*.

The language in vs. 2 is unavoidably monogamous. Women and men were each to have their own spouse. BDAG states that ἴδιος connotes “private, one’s own (exclusively).” Coupled with ἐκάστη (each) it becomes stronger yet. Paul states that women were each to have their own husbands in the same sense that men were each to have their own wives. Men and women shared the same expectations of monogamy from the other, which broke with both Jewish and Roman cultural views. Polygamy which was given in Jewish culture is never encouraged by Paul; and extra marital liaisons which was a given in Roman culture are renounced throughout Paul’s epistles in the strongest terms. Women had every right to expect the exclusive sexual attention of their husbands in the eyes of God.

Vs. 3 speaks of fulfilling a debt or paying what is due, [ὀφειλὴν ἀποδιδότω] [ὀφειλὴν – that which is owed, a debt, ones due, an obligation. ἀποδιδότω - meet, pay out, fulfill, yield]. Husbands owe their wives a debt of gratitude in the same sense that wives owe their husbands. There is no suggestion that one owes the other more or less. Both are equal in what they owe to the other. Again, to both the Romans and the Jews the woman would have owed her husband considerably more than he to her, since she was by definition less than him.

Vs. 4 is truly a radical idea that breaks completely with both Jewish and Roman views. It places the authority (*exousia*) of the husband's body under the wife's control. He is not his own to please himself as he wants, he is her's in the bedroom. More accurately, they are both equally under each other's authority in sexual relations. The wife had the right to expect and demand the same marital fidelity and love from her husband as he did from her.

Instead of taking rights away from women or subjecting them under male domination, Paul's order of creation actually works to place men and women on an equal par in terms of personal and sexual relationships with one another. She is not less than he in the home, nor subject to his whims in the bedroom.

Paul breaks again with prevailing views by stressing the importance of love in marriage, especially the love of husbands for their wives. This too is a radical break with prevailing views. It is not just any love Paul teaches, but Christological love. Eph. 5 tells Christian husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. It is love at an impossibly high standard apart from faith. It is a love born in sacrifice and constant attention to her needs. It is love with a Christological purpose

“that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,²⁷ that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord *does* the church.”

There is no room in this teaching for male domination. The wife is not subjugated, she is loved in a way that gives her hope and joy, - as Christ loved the Church.

Peter echoes Paul's respect for wives, (1 Peter 3:7)

“Husbands, likewise, dwell with *them* with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as *being* heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.”

There is a clear spiritual equality in the apostolic teaching. Christian husbands do not rule their homes, they are heads of the household who love, honor, and dwell with their wives with understanding. In Timothy, Paul extends the honor due wives to widows as well (1 Tim. 5:3).

What Paul does in teaching this new relation of the sexes was radical to the point of genuinely upsetting the social order of Rome. The Romans considered Christian doctrine to be a direct attack on the natural order of things. Tacitus states that Christians were haters of humanity because they robbed the Roman populous of the comfort of their many gods, and because they upset the social order. At Thessalonica Christians were accused of turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6). My opinion is that these charges are, at least in part, due to the fact that Christianity redefined the relationship between men and women, away from female oppression and subjugation toward an ethic of Christological love.

Another example:

Where both Roman and Jewish divorce laws allowed men to divorce their wives at will, and gave women little recourse to remove themselves from a bad marriage, in 1 Cor. 7:11 Paul tells husbands not to divorce their wives and further grants men and women equal freedom from the marriage should the other unbelieving spouse abandon the marriage (1 Cor. 7:15). Later in the same chapter (7:39) he seems to distance himself from Jewish Levirate marriage by giving women the right to marry whom they wanted upon the death their husbands. Her freedom to choose a spouse was not subject to rabbinical law. There is a new dignity granted women under the law in Paul's theology.

The headship of the Christian order of creation espoused by Paul is obviously something radically better than the domination of men over women in Roman culture and the legal control of men over women in Jewish culture.

Paul is not parroting the cultural norms of his day. Yes, men and women are different, occupy different vocations and have different roles in family, church, and society under the Pauline teaching, but unlike in the dominant cultures of Paul's day, different did not mean less than.

Not surprisingly, a faith that taught God loved men and women the same, that His redemption had given worth and value to all people, so that there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; but all are one in Christ Jesus, was very attractive to those who were being marginalized, especially to women.

Celsus, a 2nd-century detractor of the faith, once taunted that the church attracted only "the silly and the mean and the stupid, with women and children." His contemporary, Bishop Cyprian of Carthage, acknowledged in his *Testimonia* that "Christian maidens were very numerous" and that it was difficult to find Christian husbands for all of them. These comments give us a picture of a church disproportionately populated by women.

Catherine Kroeger, *The Neglected History of Women in the Early Church: Christianity Today*, Issue 17, 1988.

The order of creation implicit throughout Christian teaching was a liberating doctrine for women. Unlike today's progressives, they did not see matters of headship and submission as oppressive or restrictive. They found freedom from the oppression of the world in God's created order.

Still some might argue that the women who found the Christian faith preferable to the oppression of Roman male domination or rabbinical rules were from the lower social strata. They were women who were truly oppressed like slaves and the poor. Women who knew a greater measure of freedom, and were able to engage in activities that exceeded the strictures of the Christian orders of creation, would never have subjugated themselves under Christian sexual roles.

But again, history shows that this isn't true either. Especially in the 3rd and 4th centuries many Christian converts came from the upper levels of Roman society. There were even women who converted to Christianity, who had tasted the so called "freedom" to engage in activities God's order gave only to men - like the priesthood. History records the examples of two prominent Roman priestesses who turned to Christ. Daria was a Vestal Virgin who converted to Christianity around 280 AD and Coelia Concordia was the last chief vestal virgin and converted in the late 4th century. There are examples of other vestals whose names have been chiseled off of inscriptions who are believed to have converted and been struck from memory by Rome.

The vestals were the ultimate priestesses in the Roman Empire. There were usually six vestals serving in the temple to the goddess Vesta. They were chosen between the ages of 6 and 10 from good Roman families. They had to be free from any physical defect or blemish. A vestal was expected to serve for 30 years, though they seem to have hardly ever retired.

The duty of a vestal was to tend to the sacred hearth fire from which every fire throughout Rome was kindled. She was considered the very image of Rome and was honored where ever she went. Romulus and Remus were said to be born from a Vestal Virgin. So vestals were portrayed as the mothers of Rome. They were free to go out in public and attend public events. They were special guests where ever they went. It is said they were given front row seats at all sporting events. If a Vestal touched a slave the slave was made free. If a vestal was seen by a prisoner on his way to execution, the prisoner's life was spared.

The Vestals also made a flour called "*mola salsa*" that was to be sprinkled on every sacrifice to any god in Rome. No god could be worshipped in Rome without this gift of the Vestals. This effectively made the Vestals the supreme high priestesses of all religions in Rome. They were, to be sure the most powerful women in Rome.

Yet a handful of Vestals turned away from their so called sexual liberation, and embraced Christ. They did not consider Christianity repressive because it redefined who they were and what offices they could occupy. They

submitted themselves a male priesthood and to the worship of the One True Triune God. It is testament to the fact that the perceived oppression of the order of creation seen by modern progressives was not at all oppressive to those early Christian converts.

Clearly the argument that Paul was only parroting his culture when he spoke of sex specific roles within the family and Church crumbles in the fact of the historical record. Paul's views on the sexes were not defined by his culture, nor were his views oppressive. On the contrary, the order of creation as taught by Paul was radically freeing to those who were oppressed by the confusion of their age. I would submit that in our age the order of creation remains a freeing doctrine in the face of society's corruption of the relationship between the sexes. Christ's power to give hope to those crushed by the world remains active and alive in a world bent on denying Him. Thanks be to God.