

---

Theses

---


2017

## A comparative-historical analysis of cross-cultural influences affecting the evolving of Christian marriage in the first century CE

Kevin Smith

*The University of Notre Dame Australia*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses>

 Part of the Religion Commons

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA  
Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

---

**Publication Details**

Smith, K. (2017). A comparative-historical analysis of cross-cultural influences affecting the evolving of Christian marriage in the first century CE (Master of Philosophy (School of Philosophy and Theology)). University of Notre Dame Australia.  
<https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/178>

This dissertation/thesis is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact [researchonline@nd.edu.au](mailto:researchonline@nd.edu.au).



A comparative-historical analysis of cross-cultural influences  
affecting the evolving of Christian marriage  
in the first century CE

By

KEVIN PAUL SMITH

Degree of Master of Philosophy

School of Philosophy and Theology  
The University of Notre Dame Australia  
19 Mouat Street  
Fremantle  
Western Australia 6959

June 2017

Dissertation Supervisor

DR LAWRENCE PANG

Co-supervisor

PROF. PETER BLACK

## **DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

This dissertation is the candidate's own work and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other institution.

To the best of the candidate's knowledge, the dissertation contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the dissertation.

Kevin Paul Smith  
Fremantle, Western Australia  
June 2017

## TABLE OF CONTENT

<b>CHAPTER I: RESEARCH SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>5</b>
RESEARCH QUESTIONS: SOCIAL ENQUIRY .....	5
RELIGIOUS ENQUIRY .....	6
HISTORICAL QUESTIONS.....	7
METHODOLOGY: COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS - CAUSE AND EFFECT.....	9
COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL VERSUS FAITH-BASED ANALYSIS .....	10
<b>CHAPTER II: CULTURAL BACKGROUND.....</b>	<b>16</b>
POLITICS AND PATRONAGE .....	17
HONOUR AND SHAME.....	19
POWER AND INFLUENCE.....	20
JEWISH SOCIETY .....	23
JEWISH DIVERSITY AND COUNTER-CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY .....	29
CHRONOLOGY.....	31
<b>CHAPTER III: SCRIPTURAL ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>34</b>
JEWISH MARRIAGE – THE TRADITIONAL ROOTS .....	34
CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE – A CULTURAL CHALLENGE .....	40
GOSPELS .....	41
CULTURAL CHANGE .....	43
THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN.....	44
EPISTLES .....	48
PAUL’S MARRIAGE ANALOGIES REFLECT THE ESSENTIAL TRUST IN MARRIAGE.....	52
WIDER CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF DIVORCE .....	53
LINGUISTIC CULTURAL ANALYSIS .....	55
<b>CHAPTER IV: MARRIAGE &amp; THE HEALTH OF THE STATE .....</b>	<b>61</b>
ROMAN SOCIETY .....	61
<b>CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>72</b>
RESEARCH: RETURNING TO THE SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	75
CROSS-CULTURAL SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS IMPACT .....	77
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>78</b>

## ABSTRACT

Anecdotal evidence and media discussions indicate that today formal marriage is not deemed necessary to cement a conjugal relationship. Many nominally Christian countries such as France, Germany, the U.K., Ireland and Australia have given de facto relationships the same or similar legal standing as formal marriages. In addition, the legitimacy of children born of de facto liaisons is no longer a contested issue. We are living in a time of important social change.

Similarly, the Roman world of the first century was experiencing great social change, including issues surrounding marriage and the bearing and raising of children. This investigation examines how these changes impacted an evolving Christian outlook on marriage, and conversely how Christianity impacted marriage in the pagan environment.

By researching how Christian marriage evolved during the social and political turmoil of the first century C.E. this dissertation identifies what were considered the essentials of marriage, and how they were seen to relate to the welfare of the family, and the welfare of the state.

## **CHAPTER I: RESEARCH SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY**

There appears to be no body of literature dealing specifically with Christian and cross-cultural marriage in the first century C.E., however many scholars examining the nature of the household, the forces that impacted marriage in the ruling classes, and the evident decline in social mores in the early days of the Caesars have necessarily examined the place of marriage itself in the changing society of that time.

This study mines these resources to identify any impact Christian marriage might have had on the cultural mix as it evolved, and to establish how the marriage of Christians developed within the competing social pressures at that time. As it progresses the study examines the cultural and political manifestations of the three major cultural groupings, Roman, Hellenic and Jewish, within the context of the Mediterranean cultures of the Roman hegemony. By doing this it becomes possible to discern how or whether Roman and Hellenic influences impacted Judaeo-Christian views on marriage and vice-versa, and how Christian belief in the perceived imminence of the Parousia impacted the married behaviour of Christians.

The most important source of information on Christian-marriage-values is the New Testament body of scriptures. By examining the scriptures this dissertation shows that Christ practiced and indeed fulfilled the Mosaic Law, to which, as Jews, his disciples remained faithful. However, it is also apparent that early Christians believed that the gift of Christ's sacrificial death freed Christians, post-Resurrection, from the traditional and ancient Law, as it was being interpreted by their contemporary Pharisees, and the Sadducees who administered the Temple. How did this transition effect marriage?

### **Research Questions: Social Enquiry**

This study will analytically examine how secular and religious aspects of marriage in the first century Roman hegemony impacted contemporary Christian communities and how or whether, in turn, Christianity influenced change in the

pagan environment surrounding marriage and family. The importance placed by society on such elements in marriage as 1) commitment, 2) property rights, 3) conjugal rights, 4) family expectations and honour, 5) inheritance, and 6) fidelity within society generally and within the early Church community will be examined in this study. These essential elements in marriage as constituted in first century practice, are recognized for the most part in both Roman and Jewish law<sup>1</sup>. This thesis will examine how the advent of Christianity addressed them, and how in this way society impacted on Christianity and Christianity impacted on the wider society.

### **Religious enquiry**

To investigate the religious and/or metaphysical aspects of marriage it is necessary to examine how the monotheistic beliefs of Jews and Christians with their sense of divine covenant affected the dimensions of sacredness in the marriage vow, by encouraging fidelity and commitment to a covenant with God and with each other. The research will show the important contribution to the universal, secular concept of marriage, of such widespread factors as legitimacy, property-inheritance, politically motivated racial and/ or religious integrity, ritual purity, and sexual taboos.

In-order-to make the study as objective as possible a distinction is made between faith-based analysis and comparative-historical analysis of the available evidence, to ensure that the conclusions drawn are logically-based, and to show that Christianity impacted on, and was impacted by the mixed cultural environments of Greek, Roman, Jewish and Hellenistic-Jewish communities. This issue is discussed more fully after the section on methodology below.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 17-52.

## **Historical questions**

The Jewish, Roman and Hellenistic cultural influences on first century marriage can be discerned in part from examining writers of the period, and identifying relevant questions. For example, from the New Testament scriptural references could it be inferred that an early overriding concern with Parousia inhibits the development of marriage doctrine or belief? Was the avoidance of sexual sin considered reason enough for marriage? Are sacredness-or-spirituality, or procreation-or-conjugal love, considered essential elements of marriage? How did early Christians relate to the secular philosophers' view that marriage and family were the prime building blocks for a stable state? Did they consider such a view relevant in the context of their communities at that time?

By using comparative-historical analysis the inquiry seeks to identify major historical shifts in attitude towards the essentials of marriage, for example on a spiritual basis, from covenant and religious awe in the time of Christ, to freely given commitment with reverence and human love; and from ritual cleanliness and openness to procreation of heirs in earlier times, to sexual fidelity and practical partnership towards the end of the first century.

Chapter 2 in this thesis examines the cultural context for this study and Chapters 3 and 4, *Scriptural Analysis* and *Marriage and the Health of the State*, draw primarily on contemporary first century accounts that discuss, comment on, and examine the behaviour of people at various levels of society. The evidence is examined to determine how behaviour often challenged perceptions of the ideal norms, thus creating an unusually receptive environment for evolving Christian marriage values.

In order to garner contemporary information specific to Christian marriage in the first century this thesis examines, in addition to the New Testament scriptures, the classical works of contemporary writers. Prime sources are the Jewish writers Josephus and Philo, as well as such Roman and Greek writers and philosophers as Cicero, Juvenal, Livy, Seneca, Tacitus and Pliny and others who will be quoted. In



addition, many scholars such as church historian the Abbe Fouard<sup>2</sup> in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, provide excellent socio-historical background on marriage, divorce and sexual mores as corollaries within their other work. This paper also includes recent works by cultural and social analysts Giordani<sup>3</sup>, Malina<sup>4</sup>, co-authors Stambaugh and Balch<sup>5</sup>, Conzelmann<sup>6</sup>, Riches<sup>7</sup>, Loader<sup>8</sup>, Nunnally-Cox<sup>9</sup>, Fiorenza<sup>10</sup>, Ruden<sup>11</sup>, Meier<sup>12</sup>, Vermes<sup>13</sup> and Wray<sup>14</sup> who have written perceptively about marriage in the wider context of culture including the practice of divorce and perceived changes in the role of women in Jewish, Hellenic and Roman society. A recently published historical study of *Christian Marriage*, edited by Glenn Olsen, includes a contribution by Francis Martin specifically on *Marriage in the New Testament Period*<sup>15</sup> that examines the effects, on the disciples and their families, of Jesus' views on marriage.

---

<sup>2</sup> Constant Fouard, *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1892).

<sup>3</sup> Igino Giordani, *The Social Message of Jesus*, trans. Alba I. Zizzamia, Reprint ed. (Paterson, NJ: St Anthony Guild, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Rev. ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in its Social Environment*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity*, trans. John E. Steely (London, UK: Abingdon Press, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> John Riches, "The Social World of Jesus," *Interpretation* 50, no. 4 (1996): 383-393.

<sup>8</sup> William R. G. Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Janice Nunnally-Cox, *Foremothers: Women of the Bible* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. (NY: Crossroad 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Ruden, *Paul among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*. 1st ed. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York, NY: Doubleday 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Geza Vermes, *Jesus in his Jewish Context* (London, UK.: SCM-Canterbury Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> T. J. Wray, *Good Girls, Bad Girls of the New Testament: Their Enduring Lessons* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Francis Martin, "Marriage in the New Testament Period," in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, ed. Glen W. Olsen (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2013), 50-100.

As already indicated to gain perspective on marriage as depicted in the first century it was found valuable to look at what recent commentators have said about divorce and the changing role of women in the first century Mediterranean environment. By immersion in the complex and competing cultures of that time and place, a picture can be developed of the pressure for change resulting from the Christian message, the growing corrosion of traditional families in Roman society, and the recognized need for stability in the State. Stambaugh and Balch reiterate the importance of family for such stability:

Greco-Roman political writers understood the household to be the basic building block of the state. Cities, they observed, are composed of households; the state constitution, then, must regulate relationships in these smaller units (Aristotle, *Politics*; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2. 24-27).<sup>16</sup>

As the first century was a time of great social foment in the civilizations around the Mediterranean in those countries that were either major conquests of the Roman Empire or client states, this thesis focuses on the impact, at that time, of emerging Christianity on Jewish civilization on the one hand and Romano-Hellenic civilization on the other. The focus of the inquiry is specifically on the cultural manifestations of that impact on subsequent social changes as they affected marriage.

**Methodology: Comparative-historical analysis - cause and effect**

Initially this thesis examines what the sacred scriptures of both Old and New Testaments indicated or implied were essential elements of marriage and why, in classical antiquity, marriage itself was considered a requirement for a civilized state.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Stambaugh and Balch, *The New Testament*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 445-455; Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities*, trans. Earnest Cary (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2:24-27.

Comparative-historical analysis proponents James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer<sup>18</sup> review the method's long and distinguished career in social studies reaching back to Adam Smith's seminal economic text, *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, Alexis de Tocqueville's exposition of American democracy, *De la Democratie en Amerique* in 1835, and Marx and Engel's *Das Kapital* in 1848, that introduced revolutionary socialism. They commented that all work in the tradition was concerned with causal analysis, an emphasis on processes over time, and the use of systematic and contextualized comparison.<sup>19</sup>

Over the past 50 years, comparative-historical analysis' growth as a major contributor to qualitative research has been attributed to its focus on the causal aspects of development and change. Integral to this investigation will be secondary research to determine what causes and effects have been identified by researchers. For example, it will be relevant to investigate whether new laws or rules changed traditional or cultural expectations of legitimacy and inheritance and whether or how religious and spiritual needs and expectations impacted on the evolution of marriage in that early period.

### **Comparative-historical versus faith-based analysis**

By using comparative-historical analysis as the instrument to work through the available historical and documentary evidence and secondary sources, it is necessary to face the situation that for some conservative religious thinkers there could be an issue in deciding between what is discovered and a faith-based view of history, should outcomes appear to contradict one another. Highly respected theologian David Ellenson points out that both Jewish and Christian scholars have laid down a body of work over the past two hundred years arguing the relative

---

<sup>18</sup> J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis: Achievements and Agendas* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-10.

<sup>19</sup> J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis*, 17.

value of a faith-based, theological examination of the scriptures, versus historical analysis.<sup>20</sup>

In order to strengthen the methodology in this inquiry it was considered important to examine major writers who have worked on validating comparative-historical analysis in their pursuit of theological truth. Sources consulted include Mahoney and Rueschemeyer,<sup>21</sup> Myers<sup>22</sup>, Harvey<sup>23</sup>, Yerushalmi<sup>24</sup> and Ellenson<sup>25</sup>.

The direction of this inquiry will illustrate how a comparative-historical analysis is complementary to a more traditionally accepted faith-based analysis of the events and stories related in the Old and New Testament canons. By discussing this debate, the issue of faith-based versus comparative-historical analysis can be put into perspective, both historically and logically.

The arguments bearing on the validity of such research are well covered by David Ellenson in *Jewish Meaning in a World of Choice*, referenced below. He earlier published *Wissenschaft des Judentums, Historical Consciousness and Jewish Faith: the recognition of diverse paths of Frankel, Auerbach, and Halevy*.<sup>26</sup> Another Jewish scholar, David Myers, in his discussion on historical consciousness and the Jewish faith, indicates that the root difference between the two Jewish approaches [historical and faith-based] rests on the contrast between Jewry as a special creation of God outside time, the classical view, versus an historical

---

<sup>20</sup> David N. Ellenson, *Jewish Meaning in a World of Choice: Studies in Tradition and Modernity* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis*.

<sup>22</sup> D. N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1965).

<sup>24</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Washington, WA: University of Washington Press, 1982).

<sup>25</sup> David N. Ellenson, *Wissenschaft Des Judentums, Historical Consciousness and Jewish Faith: The Diverse Paths of Frankel, Auerbach and Halevy* (New York, NY: Leo Baeck, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Ellenson. *Wissenschaft Des Judentums*, 249-267.

analysis of the development over time, of the Jewish understanding of God as the monotheistic author of creation.<sup>27</sup>

From an historical perspective, God figures in all the facets of the revealed nature of the Jewish laws and rules as well as in *changes of emphasis over time through the statements of the prophets*. A comparative-historical analysis looks for changes in context and circumstance that might have influenced development in marriage customs and laws as part of this process.

In discussing *Historical Consciousness and the Jewish Faith*, Myers examines the same issue:

This question about the relationship between the modern study of history and the matter of religious faith, of how to reconcile adherence to sacred tradition with critical methods of historical research, has plagued many religious observers during the past two hundred years ... Indeed, a wrestling with this question of the relationship between faith and historical analysis has marked virtually all sectors of an acculturated and university trained occidental Jewry since the rise of modern historical consciousness during the last two hundred years.<sup>28</sup>

Myers further quotes from Yerushalmi's highly regarded *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*:

[The] discovery of history [by the Jewish historian] is not a mere interest in the past, which always existed, but a new awareness, a perception of a fluid temporal dimension from which nothing is exempt. The major consequence for Jewish historiography is that it cannot view Judaism as something absolutely given, and subject to a priori definition. Judaism is inseparable from its evolution through time.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Myers, *Resisting History*, passim.

<sup>28</sup> Myers, *Resisting History*, quoted in Ellenson, *Jewish Meaning*, 49-50.

<sup>29</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zachor*. This short *Zachor* (Hebrew for remembrance) is encapsulated in this excerpt. Further in-depth discussion of Yerushalmi's view on the writing of history may be found in David Myer and Alexander Kaye, *The Faith of Fallen Jews: Yosef Hayun Yerushalmi and the Writing of Jewish History* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press 2013); cf. Ellenson, *Jewish Meaning*, 49-50.

Myers pursues the discussion and quoting another noted Jewish scholar, commenting on Rabbis and Rabbinate says that

The patterns themselves impose meaning on the events that occur and in so doing they obliterate distinctions between past, present, and future, between here and now and then and there.<sup>30</sup>

The importance of history in the devolution of understanding history is perhaps born out in this quotation from Richard Niebuhr, arguing that symbol and history are not necessarily opposites.

For history may function as myth or as symbol when men use it (or are forced by processes in their history itself to employ it) for understanding their present and their future. When we grasp our present, not so much as a product of our past, but more as essentially revealed in that past, then the historic account is necessarily symbolic; it is not merely descriptive of what was once the case.<sup>31</sup>

In Ellenson's view, "The modern study of history, with its critical canon of scholarship and its dogmatic notion of change, is thus by definition *seemingly* antithetical to faith."<sup>32</sup> This position is exemplified by Søren Kierkegaard, the famed nineteenth century Protestant theologian who wrote, within this context:

One can *know* nothing at all about *Christ*. He is the paradox, the object of faith, existing only for faith. But all historical communication is communication of *knowledge*, hence from history one can learn nothing at all about Christ ... He can only be believed.<sup>33</sup>

Further to this discussion, in his 1965 book, *The Historian and the Believer*, noted Protestant scholar of religion Van Harvey observed that the commitment of the modern historian to:

... a sustained and critical attempt to recover the past, was motivated by a 'Promethean will to truth' that was genuinely revolutionary when this approach fully

---

<sup>30</sup> Myers, *Resisting History* quoted in Ellenson, *Jewish Meaning*, 49-50.

<sup>31</sup> Richard H. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York, NY: Harper Row, 1963), 156.

<sup>32</sup> Ellenson, *Jewish Meaning*, 249.

<sup>33</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. R. W. Bretall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 389.

manifested itself during the nineteenth century... If the theologian believes on faith that certain events (as recorded in Holy Writ) occurred, the historian regards all historical claims as having only a greater or lesser degree of probability and he regards the attachment of faith to these claims as corruption of historical judgement.<sup>34</sup>

He observed that modern historical method was based on (naturalistic) assumptions quite irreconcilable with traditional belief (based on supernatural metaphysics).

The Catholic position was well-established in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas in his on-going debate with the Averroistas (the followers of his contemporary, the Muslim scholar, Averroes in Spain) and was re-enforced by the neo-Thomists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Aquinas affirmed the view that there could be no conflict between truths, either those arrived at through rational enquiry or those that were considered revealed. Thomism, following Aristotle, states that either something *is* or it *is not*, it cannot be both. If there appears to be conflict between scientific truth and revealed truth, then one of the stated truths is wrong and the apparent conflict between them will be resolved when the falsity of either position is exposed. In his collection of Aquinas' philosophical texts Thomas Gilby quotes Aquinas as follows:

This is tantamount to holding that belief can be about things whose contrary can be demonstrated. Since what can be so demonstrated is bound to be a necessary truth and its opposite false and impossible, the upshot would be that faith avows what is false and impossible. This is intolerable to our ears, for not even God could contrive such a situation.<sup>35</sup>

As this thesis endeavours to clarify relevant aspects of historical truth, it is important for clear understanding of the Bible narratives that the facts established by comparative-historical analysis call on the latest possible aids in terms of archaeological research, linguistic rigour, and relevant branches of science.

From early in the twentieth century modern scholarship has resulted in high levels of co-operative achievement

---

<sup>34</sup> Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, 286.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Gilby, *Thomas Aquinas: Philosophical Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 30-31.

involving archaeologists, classical linguists, anthropologists, social and historical researchers and other scholars working in important secular and theological contexts. In a postscript to his published 1941 lecture, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, William F. Albright commented that only through archaeological research could biblical history become a scientific discipline.<sup>36</sup>

Six years after these words were written, the chance discovery of a cache of leather and copper scrolls preserved in the desert caves of Qumran around the Dead Sea, inspired an explosion of archaeological work in Palestine that continues to this day. The shared findings of scholars from Jewish, Christian and secular foundations are adding to the depository of historical knowledge and the accurate dating of recorded events, including biblical events. Importantly this modern archaeology is discovering how people lived and this in turn helps the scholar to more accurately interpret how society functioned and identifies cultural behaviours, important to the understanding of marriage.

---

<sup>36</sup> William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel: The Ayer Lectures of the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School 1941* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 1956), 176.



## CHAPTER II: CULTURAL BACKGROUND

First century Christianity has its roots in Judaism. Christ and his first disciples and Apostles were Jews whose religion was embedded in their culture, so it is essential firstly to examine how the nature and purpose of marriage was understood by the first century Jewish communities, and then move on to examine how the developing Judaeo-Christian religion impacted the Hellenistic and Latin communities of the Roman world at that time; then demonstrate how, in turn, those cultures played a role in the development of Christian marriage. Francis Martin, acknowledging his source as a study by Everett Ferguson, uses the following image:

From the point of view of the preaching of the gospel message, the first century Mediterranean basin may be imagined as three concentric circles. The outer circle (the governmental and social context) was created by the Roman world; the next inner circle (that of culture, education and philosophy) was the product of the Greek world; and the most immediate circle (that of religion, namely monotheism, and a history of divine activity and promises and ethical thought related to that religion) was provided by the Jewish matrix. These were not hermetically sealed compartments; they interacted with and mutually affected one another.<sup>1</sup>

In both the Jewish and the Romano-Hellenic worlds there were three identifiable levels of cultural background, practices and behaviour. The ruling classes had well-defined attitudes to marriage as it affected kinship, inheritance, reputation and dignity. The behaviour of the wealthy reflected similar values, as both classes at differing levels saw politics and religion as important inter-related ingredients in the marriage mix. The third level in society embraced artisans, craftsmen and others who were dependant for their livelihood on the patronage and support of levels one and two i.e. the ruling and wealthy classes. In all marriage situations, the cultural norm was to marry within your religious and cultural environment and class, or slightly to advantage if you could.<sup>2</sup>

Christianity, to the casual observer of the time, would have seemed a Jewish minor sect with not much chance of survival in the maelstrom of Palestinian politics. With

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin, "New Testament Period," 50-100.

<sup>2</sup> Stambaugh and Balch, *The New Testament*, 210.

the death of Jesus, crucified as a criminal and enemy of Rome, his closest disciples were in disarray. They were perceived by the Roman authorities as a Jewish sect that tended to disturb the status quo, and particularly the 'client-state' relationship between the Empire and the former Hasmonean kingdom being run by their vassals the Herodians.

Herod Antipas ruled Galilee as Tetrarch until the Emperor Gaius deposed him in 39 C.E., his subjects included both Jesus of Nazareth and John the Baptist. Antipas comes most vividly to our attention in the Gospels because of his execution of John, who had made a public issue over Antipas' marriage to Herodias, a marriage that violated the Jewish Law (Matt. 14:1-11; Luke 3:19-20).

Mark's version (6:17-27) gives us a glimpse of life in Antipas' court, peopled by courtiers, military officers, leading men, a conniving Queen [Herodias] and even a royal dancing lady [Salome, Herodias' daughter by her first husband, Philip, who was the brother of Antipas and Tetrarch of the region north of Galilee].<sup>3</sup>

It would seem significant that Christ supported John's activities and sought baptism from him, thus giving overt support to John's activities that publicly upheld the Mosaic Law regarding divorce and marriage, and shaming both Antipas and Herodias.

In order to understand how the position and influence of Christianity impacted this moral landscape as the century unfolded, it is necessary to understand the major forces shaping how society worked in the first century, and to identify the role of marriage, whether Jewish or Graeco-Roman in the context of the changing social mores.

### **Politics and Patronage**

This study will investigate how emerging social changes in the predominant Judaeo-Christian and Romano-Hellenic cultures of the eastern Mediterranean, affected society, religious belief, family and state as they each interacted with each other, and spread westwards.

---

<sup>3</sup> Stambaugh and Balch, *The New Testament*, 25.

Firstly, there are the relevant concepts of kinship and the nature of patronage-and-power. Palestine in the time of Jesus was run by Rome. It was a time of dissent and resentment that climaxed, within a generation, with the destruction of Jerusalem and the strengthening of the Jewish diaspora in Hellenistic Asia. Hanson and Oakman's perceptive and systematic analysis of the period issues the following caveat:<sup>4</sup>

The social domains (or institutional systems) addressed by cultural anthropologists (kinship, politics, economics, religion) are never discrete entities that operate in isolation from one another. They operate in every society. But beyond *interaction*, one sphere may be *embedded* in another. By this we mean that its definition, structures, and authority are dictated by another sphere.

As Malina<sup>5</sup> has demonstrated, religion in the ancient Mediterranean (and specifically with regard to Israelite religion) was always embedded in either politics or kinship.

Kinship in ancient Israel and Judah, as well as in first century Palestine, was affected by the political sphere especially in terms of law, for example, incest, rape, marriage, divorce, paternity and inheritance. But kinship also affected politics, most notably in patron-client relationships and developing networks of friends.

Kinship was affected by religion in terms of purity, for example, regulating who could have sex with whom and the ethnic and religious status of one's spouse. And kinship affected religion (embedded in politics) in terms of descent especially in the importance laid on lineages of priest and their wives, but also by regulating membership in the political religion for the laity.

Finally, kinship was interactive with the economic sphere in terms of occupations, dowry-and-inheritance, and land tenure.

---

<sup>4</sup> K. C. Hanson, and Douglas. E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 20-23.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

## Honour and Shame

In this examination of the wider cultures of the first-century world of the Roman hegemony, it is important to note that within the cultures that surrounded the first Christians, honour and shame were paramount considerations, particularly when a member of the family was to marry. Honour was related to one's position in society, and it embraced what society thought of one's power, position, religious integrity and self-respect. Shame was what would be felt should one's virtue be compromised; one would not want to be considered shameless. Malina describes the honourable and the shameless as:

the honourable person is one who knows how to and can maintain his or her social boundaries in the intersection of power, gender, and social respect including God. The shameless person is one who does not observe social boundaries. The fool is one who takes a shameless person seriously.<sup>6</sup>

In this same context Malina points out that if your gender was male you were required to show that you have power over others, that your male sexuality was linked to that power. This often played out in male sexual excesses. If your gender was female you needed to show how well you were connected to power, how your virtue had been protected and preserved, and your modesty respected. You should be deferential to authority (the male) and restrained. Specific duties and rights followed gender, but boldness was reserved for men.<sup>7</sup>

Religious consideration was centred on respect for traditional piety. It cannot be over-emphasized that, for the peoples around the Mediterranean, religion was embedded in culture. For Romans that meant participation in traditional rituals associated with household gods, regional gods and the deified Emperor. When a country or region was conquered, the Romans tended to permit local religious customs to be incorporated with their own and sometimes, as in the Egypt of Cleopatra, they were actively adopted and adapted. Religion and politics were intertwined. This was pragmatic politics. For Jews, including Christian Jews,

---

<sup>6</sup> Malina, *New Testament*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Malina, *New Testament*, 48-53.

monotheism was the key to religious identity; all things come from God as the source, followed by parents, grandparents, government authorities or tribal leaders, kings and lawful rulers. For the first half of the first century, before the revolutionary wars in Judea, Romans had extended to Jews throughout the Empire the right to practice their own religion in their own way. They were exempt from taking part in Roman rituals and/or the concomitant feasts and orgies. This exemption was unique to the Jews and exceptional. Theologian and biblical commentator Sean Freyne quotes Roman Greek scholar Strabo who, writing in the Augustan period concerning the City of Cyrene in North Africa writes:

There were four classes in the city – citizens, farmers, resident-aliens and Jews...In all probability then, the legal status of Jewish communities within the cities was that of a free association for religious purposes, and this would also have included administration of the group's own internal affairs. This explains why we find fully organized quasi-autonomous Jewish communities with their own synagogues, officials and judicial system within the Greek cities and also in Rome (Cf. Acts 28:17).<sup>8</sup>

### **Power and Influence**

Malina<sup>9</sup> and others stress that in the Mediterranean the family and kinship were the central focus of life; the clan or group one belonged to was paramount, and one sought honour by being well-connected to power and status. Gender and religious observance were important ingredients in the mix so the choice of a spouse, or the family-of-choice for a spouse, needed to meet one's criteria for honour and esteem. Stambaugh and Balch describe the first century socio-economic culture in terms of classical tradition.

The cultures of the classical world were based in a tradition that was older than money. Greeks, Romans and Hebrews all looked back to a time when wealth and status were measured in terms of land or flocks, and power was measured in terms of family allegiances. By the time of the New Testament, money and movable wealth had become much more important. Still, the basic social fabric of these civilizations was woven of the familiar fibre of personal

---

<sup>8</sup> Sean Freyne, *New Testament Message: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), 70-73.

<sup>9</sup> Malina, *New Testament*, 117-148.

contacts: of favours done, returns expected, allegiance owed.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to family, “The (term) *family* often meant the patriarchal one, including the wives and children of married sons... It was rare for persons to remain unmarried.”<sup>11</sup> The nature of family versus household will be discussed later in this dissertation.

When the focus tightens on what was happening in the Jewish provinces and Palestine at the time, it becomes apparent that the monotheistic, religious, commitment of Jews and Christians represented a challenge to the ordinary understanding of most of the Romano-Hellenistic world. The cast of influencers in Judaism was diverse.

In Jerusalem itself, the Sadducees, who ran the Jewish temple, the international symbol of Judaism, owed their power to Rome, and its representatives who kept them in that powerful role, administering the Mosaic Law as they saw it.<sup>12</sup> It was they who successfully portrayed the followers of Jesus as troublemakers who sought to bring a new king into a disaffected situation that was anti-Roman. Luke 22:52 refers to the role of the Chief Priests, the Sadducees. These were appointed by the Roman authorities to manage Jewish religious affairs and administer their related law. Luke 23:1-25 tells the story of Christ’s trial as an alleged claimant to the blasphemous title *Son of God*, and subsequently as the *King of the Jews*; the Sadducees’ role in Christ’s committal. Finally, when the Roman governor Pilate found Christ had not committed an offence the Sadducee priests pursued the issue, alleging that what Christ had in fact claimed by promising a new kingdom (though not of this world) was an offence against Caesar, the corollary being that he therefore deserved the Roman death penalty for treasonous behaviour.

---

<sup>10</sup> Malina, *New Testament*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Stambaugh and Balch, *The New Testament*, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Stambaugh and Balch, *The New Testament*, 97-99; Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. William Whiston, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel 1999), 13.10.6.

Purist Pharisees, keen upholders of the detailed practices of the Mosaic Law as interpreted by themselves, had argued with Jesus' more liberal interpretation of the Law, so they too were happy to have Jesus out of the way. Luke 11:37-53 illustrates how Jesus had insulted them when they hosted him at a banquet.

Jesus, now categorized as a criminal, died the death reserved for the worst offenders against the Roman state, crucifixion. His closest followers had remained in Jerusalem, stunned that the person they saw as the Messiah, the one anointed by God to lead the Jews to freedom, had succumbed so easily.

Luke 23:48-54; 24:1-49 tell the story of Christ's death and resurrection and how, led initially by the loyal women, Peter and the other Apostles and disciples came to recognize their risen Lord, and put aside their fears to celebrate the triumph of Christ over death. It is notable that Mary Magdalene, who ran from the tomb to give the good news of Christ's Resurrection to the Apostles has thereby been called the 'apostle to the apostles' by Giordani<sup>13</sup> and others. However, the apostles and disciples initially did not believe Mary Magdalene and her female companions as noted in Luke 24: 10-11.

The scriptural record also mentions women in this predominately patriarchal age, who undertook important community roles as evangelists and leaders, accepting major responsibilities in the growing Christian home churches. How many were married is not recorded except for two, Mary the mother of Mark (Acts 12:12) and Priscilla, (Acts 18:1, 2). Passed over is the married, single or widowed status of others such as Martha (Luke 10:38, 39) and the various Mary's in the Gospels; Lydia, Phoebe (Romans 16:1, 2), and her fellow workers Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, and Olympas (Romans 16:6, 12, 15) as well as Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2, 3).

Whether these roles undertaken by women in Christian society were counter-cultural is a moot point. Fiorenza says Roman women in the first century were notorious for opening their houses and premises to oriental cults, some noted for ecstatic worship; there are also records of house synagogues at this time.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Giordani, *Social Message*, 193.

<sup>14</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*. 176-177.

## Jewish Society

Since biblical scholars have gained access to some 800 Essene text fragments discovered at Qumran in 1947, both Jewish and Christian commentators have come to recognize that the theology of the Essene and other religious desert communities, recorded in documents from approximately 150 B.C.E. to 50 C.E. was also reflected in the developing Christian community theology, including the description of themselves as the Community of the Renewed Covenant. Much of their allegorical language referring to the Messiah as the *light* and the *way*, and referring to the *imminence* of his coming, found its way into Christian scriptures.<sup>15</sup>

No longer can we speak about Judaism and Christianity in the first century as unified religions in sharp conflict with one another, rather we must recognize the enormous diversity of Judaism, a diversity so extensive that it included the earliest followers of Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

There were three major competing influences on the Jewish practice of their religion, as well as the rebellious Zealots who were prepared to embrace violence for religious purposes.

- As mentioned above, the first most powerful and influential group were the Sadducees who ran the Temple in Jerusalem, and who had won the right from Rome to administer their own Mosaic Law, albeit under the watchful and observant eye of the Roman procurator. The Sadducees had become somewhat laicized in their role as High Priests of the Temple, and interestingly, their leaders did not believe in any form of life after death. They did not see humanity in the dualistic fashion of the Greek philosophers who recognized the existence of body and soul in each individual, though the Jewish prophets had specifically alluded to flesh and spirit. The Sadducees were pragmatists and it was they who tried to embarrass Jesus by quizzing him on *the married status in the after-life of the woman who*

---

<sup>15</sup> Karl Paul Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Paul Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 1.



*had had seven husbands* (Luke 20:27-40). As noted, the Sadducees reputedly did not believe in an after-life.

- The second group, the Sadducees' opponents, were the Pharisees, who in an effort to purify observance of Mosaic Law, independent of foreign influence, emphasized the observance of the legalities to a degree that might seem absurd to a modern observer. It was the Pharisees, active in Jerusalem and in the regions north of the city, who sought to trap Jesus in, what they would term, heretical opinions on such matters as proper observance of the Sabbath and conservative purification practices involving avoiding contact with foreigners and women (Luke 6:1-11).
- The third influential force in Judaism at the time was the purifying life-style of the Essenes and similar sects, who, as already noted, called themselves the Followers of the Way and Sons of Light, terms later used by the early Jewish disciples of Jesus to describe their own form of Judaism (Acts 22:4). There appears to be some evidence from the scrolls discovered at Qumran that the desert communities' focus on purification and on the imminence of the promised Messiah affected their society in much the same way as Pauline Christianity, with its focus on the Parousia, affected the attitude of early Christians (John 20:30-31; 1 Corinthians 7: 25-39). Both sects were prepared to set marriage aside in favour of a more ascetic life-style and the Essenes' monastic settlement south of Jerusalem in some respects pre-figured the Christian monasticism of Benedict and the establishment of third-order lay communities in the Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Revised Edition, Penguin Books 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Clays Ltd St Ives U.K. 2011), 23-25. Vermes, in his critical analysis of the Dead Sea scrolls discusses the relationship between the Qumran and the New Testament in the context of the religious climate in Palestine at that time. He analyses the language in specific fragments couched in terms drawn by the Essenes from the Hebrew Bible and later reflected in the language of the Christian scriptures. He discusses the parallels between the Essenes' and Christian scriptural language, ideology, attitude to the Hebrew scriptures, organizational structure including single leaders (e.g. Essene overseers and Christian bishops), and the charismatic-eschatological aspects of the Scrolls.

In the context of this tri-partite division, Jesus himself, as a person who focussed on respect for the Law and passionately drove the buyers and sellers out of the Temple, might be considered a Pharisee, in the best sense of that term.<sup>18</sup> Like his opponents, he was brought up respecting and obeying the Mosaic Law and like them, he taught in the synagogues.

Jesus' influence was counter-cultural and pastoral in the way he inter-acted with women, non-Jews, the sick and disabled, tax-collectors and former criminals – all of whom were an embarrassment to his purist Pharisee opponents. It is not surprising that Jesus viewed the emerging social debate on marriage and divorce in a context that recognized human frailty.

There appears to be no evidence that marriage practices, whether Jewish, Greek or Roman, underwent any immediate changes as a result of Jesus' and Paul's emphasis that marriage was not only a mutual commitment (1 Corinthians: 3-4), but also an equal partnership as foreshadowed in Genesis. The status quo was maintained; it was already varied and related to the traditions in individual families and kinship groups. Expectations and behaviours were not reportedly different in the Palestine of Jesus' day from what went on before. In good families, this implied commitment to the marriage contract, the procreation of children as heirs, keenness to preserve property rights as defined by the current rules of kinship and of Roman law. Men and women had their separate roles in marriage, in the household, and in the community. However, as we follow Paul on his journeys we are alerted to the pressures for change and the unease accompanying sexual excesses, riotous feasting, drunken and violent behaviour that threatened civic harmony, family and, as Caesar Augustus had foreseen, the very future of Rome.

Paul had ruled on divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 as though he had no direct knowledge of the words of Christ regarding divorce as they were later recorded in the Gospel accounts of Christ's confrontation with the Pharisee. There is no way of knowing how Paul's personal experience of Christ-risen in the dramatic

---

<sup>18</sup> Geza Vermes, *Jesus in his Jewish Context* (SCM Press London U.K. 2003) 5. "Few, in any case, will contest that his [Jesus'] message was essentially Jewish, or that on certain controversial issues, for example whether the dead would rise again, he voiced the opinion of the Pharisees."

Damascus revelations may have influenced his views on marriage and divorce, as subsequently recorded in the Epistles. He no doubt was aware of community discussions on the matter of divorce, but he does not call on evidence of Christ's own views differing from the views of other orthodox practicing Jews, recorded by Matthew and indeed reflected in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. For Paul, even the issues related to conversion and divorce did not create controversy. He valued Christian harmony and peace, as exemplified in 1 Corinthians 15. Divorces referred to in 1 Corinthians 7:15, resulting from the conversion of one marriage partner to Christianity, drew the response: if you can't convert your partner, and he wants to leave, let him go. In this scriptural reference, there is no sense of breaking any laws, either Jewish or Roman, or indeed of any reprehensible attitude or behaviour. Then came the challenge of the Roman law, as it affected Christian converts. Hans Conzelmann<sup>19</sup> points out that, for a pagan to become a Christian required severance from all previous religious connections in terms of ritual sacrifice, mode of worship, and accord with the State religion that included worship of the Emperor and all that that entailed politically. A conversion to Christianity could put one at odds, not only with the state, but with family and prevailing family worship of household gods and family celebrations involving thanksgiving to such gods.

With modern hindsight, it is possible to deduce that Roman culturally accepted practices such as divorce, had not been addressed in the Christian community in the light of Gospel values, in the first 50 to 60 years of the first century. The issues as they arose were solved pragmatically and quietly as counselled by Paul. As Loader points out, in cases of adultery, divorce was culturally accepted as mandatory.<sup>20</sup> But divorce *did* become an urgent social issue for the Roman Emperor Augustus alongside refusal to bear children, infanticide and pederasty. According

---

<sup>19</sup> Conzelmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 118.

<sup>20</sup> William R. G. Loader, "Did Adultery Mandate Divorce? A Reassessment of Jesus' Divorce Logia," *New Testament Studies* 61, no. 1 (2015): 67-78.

to Cohick<sup>21</sup>, Ruden<sup>22</sup> and Fouard<sup>23</sup> there was community concern directed towards these and other moral failures, exerting urgent social pressures on the cohesiveness of society. These will be discussed in the later segment on the cultural climate in Rome.

Contemporary writers, including sympathetic Jewish historian and social commentator Josephus, the Roman official Pliny who had to deal with Jewish unrest involving Christians and who sought advice from Tacitus, Tacitus himself who was not pro-Christian on political grounds - all wrote about the political disruption caused by Jewish Christians who, by not adhering to Jewish religious rituals and customs as approved by Rome, eventually put themselves outside the amnesty granted to Jews in this regard. Josephus chronicles the stoning to death of James by the order of the High Priest Annas II, the son of the High Priest referred to in the Gospel account of Christ's passion. His account expresses regret that Annas misused his power, but first he describes Jesus as follows:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was (the) Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principle men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him; for he appeared alive to them the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct to this day.<sup>24</sup>

This description of Jesus by Josephus, at one time challenged as a scribe's addition, has been authenticated over centuries of scholarship. Josephus' "claim that Jesus

---

<sup>21</sup> Lynn Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). Accessed June 4, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. UNDA 2018-06-04 00:07:43

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Ruden, *Paul among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2010), Passim.

<sup>23</sup> Fouard, *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity*, Passim.

<sup>24</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), *Jewish Antiquities*, 18: 3: 3.

won over many of the Greeks is not substantiated in the New Testament and thus hardly a Christian interpolation but rather something that Josephus would have noted in his own day.”<sup>25</sup> Josephus’ description of the behaviour of Annas [Ananas] towards James is equally objective. He notes the timing with the death of the Roman procurator who was the High Priest’s source of authority in Jewish legal affairs:

Festus [ the Roman procurator] was now dead and Albinus [ his successor] was but upon the road; so he [Ananas] assembled the Sanhedrin of judges and brought before them the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and as breakers of the Law he delivered them to be stoned. ... Albinus wrote in anger to Ananas, and threatened that he would bring him to punishment for what he had done; on which King Agrippa took the high priesthood from him, when he had ruled but three months ...<sup>26</sup>

These passages from Josephus emphasize that the broader Jewish view of Christians was that they were a Jewish sect and entitled to be treated by the Romans as Jews and exempt from Roman worship. The Christians themselves are not recorded as seeking to be distinguished from their Jewish brethren. Given Paul’s focus on Parousia and that the Gospel accounts were assembled and written after the Epistles, and given the lack of any evidence to the contrary, it seems likely that no official changes to marriage practices were formulated by the Christian community, at least before 70 C.E. The Christian focus was on things eschatological.

After the Apostolic Council (c. 49 C.E.) the nexus between Judaism and Christianity had been weakened. The later destruction of Jerusalem, the original nerve centre of Christianity, moved the Christian central focus to Antioch, Rome’s major city in Asia Minor. At the time, the religious principles of Judaism were preserved in the Christian *Didache*, or *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, now known to be a Christianised version of the Jewish catechism, ‘The Two Ways’.<sup>27</sup> It would be a fair inference that such fidelity to Jewish religious values would

---

<sup>25</sup> Josephus, *Complete Works*, (Whiston’s editorial comment) page 662.

<sup>26</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20:9:1.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 84-88.

include Christian acceptance of the Jewish views on marriage. Jesus himself showed by his behaviour, as recorded by the Gospel writers, that the Law was to be respected and that love of God, reflected in unselfish love of others, was to be their overriding commitment (Mark 12:28-34).

### **Jewish diversity and counter-cultural Christianity**

To recap a little: the Jews were chaffing under Roman rule and rebel bands, generally grouped under the designated name ‘Zealots’, had formed associations that were prepared to use violence to achieve their independence. In contrast were the Essenes, who like the Pharisees were looking to purify the practice of Judaism by strict interpretation of the Mosaic Law. They had settled in the desert because they objected to the compromised authority of the Sadducees. As the Sadducees did not believe in life after death, their focus was on temporal power – now! Josephus discusses these major influencers in his seminal work, *Jewish Antiquities*.<sup>28</sup> He speaks highly of the dedication of the Essenes and their rejection of material wealth and luxury in favour of communal sharing, and in his later mention of Jesus he indicates that Jesus was a wise man and exceptional.<sup>29</sup>

Christianity introduced new ways of thinking. The available evidence from the writers of the New Testament, from near contemporary Josephus who was born in Jerusalem in 47 C.E., from Roman historian Tacitus and the Jewish philosopher Philo who were both active politically in the first century, indicate that the Christian motivation for change, and consequent civic disruption, was finally seen as separate from Judaism.

Distinguishing Christianity from traditional Jewish monotheism, was its belief in the resurrection from the dead of its founder, who had promised his followers an inheritance in the kingdom of God, his Father; and acceptance as citizens in the kingdom to come (Luke 12:32-34; Philippians 3:20). The importance of this

---

<sup>28</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18:1:2-6.

<sup>29</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18:3:3.

inheritance was that Christians, irrespective of status now, could look forward to a future without want and enjoy the warmth of belonging in a community inspired by love (1 Peter 1:3-5; 2 Peter 1:3-11).

Josephus is quoted by Fouard on the attractiveness of the Christian form of Judaism to the Greeks, Romans, Alexandrians and other North Africans who had first converted to Judaism and then found Christianity more amenable.

“Many Greeks have embraced our Law; some have remained faithful, others have been unable to bear its austerities, and have fallen away.” (Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, ii. 10.) And so, all over the earth, the Jewish communities were as vast fields open to the workmen of the Gospel; according to the Master’s words, “the harvest was already white,” (John 4.35 Douai Challoner-Rheims translation) only waiting for the Lord’s servants to gather it into the heavenly storehouses.<sup>30</sup>

Fouard’s sympathetically Christian view is not shared by Vermes, who sees Christ as a faithful Jew, and Paul, as the founder of a sect that replaced Christ’s Jewish focus on doing God’s will with a spiritual focus on Christ himself.<sup>31</sup>

This inquiry will look at how Paul and the other apostles, preachers and Christian community leaders – including women custodians of the house churches – demonstrated in their every-day lives, possible new, somewhat counter-cultural ways of relating to the people around them, including widows, the disabled, diseased, non-Jews, unwanted children and other disadvantaged.

Did this different focus on community impact the patriarchal family? This research identifies two apparent socio-historical Christian changes, relevant to this investigation of marriage; the first relating to the recognition of women as community leaders, rather than household managers, and the second to challenging attitudes towards sexual behaviour outside marriage.

As the charismatic international preacher of the Word, Paul was plain speaking and grounded in a new theology that re-interpreted the Mosaic Law through the

---

<sup>30</sup> Fouard, *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity* 57.

<sup>31</sup> Vermes, *Jesus in his Jewish Context* 49-52.

message of Christ. His followers in the Hellenistic world of the eastern Roman Empire, and the loyal followers of Jesus in Jerusalem and the surrounding Jewish tetrarchies, continued to absorb and follow Paul's counter-cultural admonitions. However, the active role of women in the early church communities and the freedom of spirit inculcated in Christian slaves and servants who wished to worship independently of the traditional household, surely existed uncomfortably within those traditional houses ruled over by a *paterfamilias*, the holder of power and ownership over all. The focus of this inquiry on marriage in the first century of Christian existence brings into play all of these social, political and religious tensions.

### **Chronology**

The first-century historical setting for this examination can be determined in a broad sense. But there is little or no evidence of actual dates in the New Testament scriptures other than by reference, where possible, to historically recorded events relevant to rulers.<sup>32</sup>

It was not the purpose of the writers of the Gospels and Epistles to record history per se, but to disseminate the teachings of Christ as the good news, the Word of God. Nevertheless, it is useful to be able to place events in their most accurately established context. Dates are important in illustrating the development over time of the Christian understanding of Jesus' views, followed by Paul's, and the Christian communities' around the Mediterranean. In his *History of Primitive Christianity* Hans Conzelmann attempts to anchor the dates of events in New Testament. He discusses the difficulties and inconsistencies encountered by scholars and comes up with a summary that is useful in the context of this report. He writes:

---

<sup>32</sup> John A.P. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, (London: SCM Press 1978) tracks the many attempts at dating the New Testament scriptures, characterising them as conjectures based on conjectures, with the reign of Domitian as the only fixed reference point. Whilst the final third segment of the first century CE is favoured, some scholars such as Adolph von Harnach attribute writings to dates stretching to 175 CE. The dates are central to the tracing of significant developments in the development of centralized patriarchal authority.



In the New Testament, three of the four emperors are named: Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius. The history of Paul extends into the time of Nero. Also named are Roman governors: Pilate, Felix, and Festus; rulers in Palestine: Herod the great, his sons Archelaus, Philip and Herod Antipas; of the later Herodians: Agrippa I and Agrippa II.<sup>33</sup>

The results of Conzelmann's thoroughgoing analysis reflect ongoing debates. He concludes:

There remains something like the following:  
Jesus: ca. 1-30; [other estimates 4 BCE - 30CE]  
Conversion of Paul: 32/35;  
Apostolic Council: 48/49 [43/44];  
Paul in Corinth: 50/52.  
By conjecture the following may also be added:  
Paul in Ephesus: between 52 and 56;  
Trip to Jerusalem, and Paul's arrest: 55/56.  
Then two year's imprisonment in Caesarea, transport to Rome, two year's imprisonment in Rome.  
... Thus his death should be put at about the year 60. To be sure, legend has it that he was put to death in the Neronean persecution (A.D. 64). But the likelihood is that he died some years earlier.<sup>34</sup>

These dates are sufficient to fix parameters for the first six or seven decades of the Christian era. How did the Christians of this era respond to Christ's views on marriage and how, under the influence of Paul and others did they cope with the moral issues affecting marriage in the context of their mixed society in a time of social foment, and widespread sexual licence?

Change and acceptance of change in the ethical and moral mores of society does not normally come easily. By looking for the causes and effects of change in how Christians established their views on the essentials of marriage in the first century it is anticipated that criteria will be identified that will be valuable in assessing precedents for social change today, in the context of Christian marriage.

It appears that the books of the accepted canon of New Testament scriptures do not specifically determine the essentials of Christian marriage. Some commentators have sought to show that the views of Christ and of Saint Paul on divorce and or

---

<sup>33</sup> Conzelmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Conzelmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 32.

separation appear to differ. Were the various communities of Christians, spread from Roman Asia to Spain, around the Mediterranean, brought to a common understanding? If not, how did the emerging structures and the new missions established by Paul and others reconcile their differences? Many of the answers to these issues and questions can be found in the writings of the New Testament, particularly when they are re-examined against the writings of others at the time.

However in order to contextualise this analysis of the evolution of Christian marriage, it is necessary to begin with an examination of its roots in the cultural and religious heritage of the Jewish tradition, as outlined in the Old Testament.

## CHAPTER III: SCRIPTURAL ANALYSIS

### Jewish Marriage – The traditional roots

The first reference important to the scriptural enquiry on marriage found in the Old Testament is in Genesis 2:18-25.<sup>1</sup>

The Lord God said: It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him... When he brought her to the man the man said: This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh: this one shall be called woman, for *out of her man this one has been taken*. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and *the two of them become one body*. The man and the woman were both naked yet they felt no shame. [Italic added for emphasis].

Here it is established that a man without a companion is seen by God to be *alone*, and that this is *not good*. The level of commitment given is expressed in the phrase *the two become one body*, often translated as *one flesh* with its reference to sexuality, in that they *were both naked yet felt no shame*.<sup>2</sup>

Commitment to each other indicates a new beginning as a household, not just as an additional arrangement with the tribal family. This thesis will later address the issue of precedence attributed to the paterfamilias or the patriarch, as the woman is taken from the man, versus the issue of equality as both begin as one body and are united as one flesh. The so-called *curse* on women, expressed in Genesis 3:16 9 (“Yet your urge shall be for your husband and he shall be your master,”) will be discussed in the context of a perceived male-oriented bias in the biblical narrative, that accords with the patriarchal society.

However, Genesis 1:27, setting down the older version of the creation story says, “So God created [man] humankind in his image, in the [divine]image of God he

---

<sup>1</sup> All biblical references in this thesis are from The New American Bible, 1970 edition, unless otherwise mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> That changed after the fall (Genesis 3:7): “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.”

created them; male and female he created them,” with no indication of precedence or role. Their function was together, to be fruitful and multiply, Genesis 1: 28.<sup>3 4</sup>

Schüngel-Straumann in her historical-critical examination makes the point:

The catchwords “Eve” or “fall from grace” suffice to recall associations concerning woman as temptress and as a sexually dangerous creature. The literature on this is boundless. Every reader of exegetical literature is always influenced by such negative texts, whether she wants to be or not.<sup>5</sup>

The second reference of importance in the context of marriage is found in Genesis 15:1-20, the story of how God made a covenant with Abram<sup>6</sup> to ensure that his married relationship with Sarai<sup>7</sup> would produce a legitimate heir or heirs who could directly inherit the family’s property. In making the covenant Abraham demonstrated that he recognized that marriage conferred legitimacy. He addressed his concerns about the legitimate transference of his property within his own family, not to one born of a slave.

It is quite likely that Abraham, a native of Ur of the Chaldees, was familiar with laws later written down and known as the Code of Hammurabi,<sup>8</sup> about 2000 B.C.E. Similar codes of surrounding civilizations, were based on the Assyrian Book of Laws, 1400-1300 B.C.E, and the Hittite code 1350-1300 B.C.E. It is reasonable to deduce that Abraham would have been following the accepted wisdom of his time.

---

<sup>3</sup> The square brackets in the above quotation indicate where the New American Bible translation varies from the currently accepted NRSV Holy Bible Catholic Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Schüngel-Straumann, Society of Biblical Literature. *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014. Accessed May 27, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. UNDA 2018-05-27 00:05:48. This contribution is based primarily on German historical-critical exegesis.

<sup>5</sup> Schüngel-Straumann, “Genesis 1-3,” 125.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 17: 5 Abram changed his name to Abraham.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 17:15 Sarai changes her name to Sarah.

<sup>8</sup> Giordani, *Social Message*, 196-198.

Igino Giordani<sup>9</sup> in *The Social Message of Jesus* states that the Code of Hammurabi consolidates the family on a basis of monogamy, but permits the right of concubinage, so that the husband may have a second wife or slave for *enjoyment*.

According to Genesis 16:1-5, Abraham, under an arrangement first suggested by Sarah, had children by her servant Hagar.<sup>10</sup> When Hagar adopted a superior attitude towards Sarah, antipathy developed between the two women. Hagar and her son Ishmael left and went into the desert. Perhaps this would not have been permitted to happen to an heir of Abraham considered legitimate by him. The New American Bible translation of Genesis 16:3 says that Sarai gave her Egyptian maid Hagar to be Abram's *concubine* whereas the NRSV translation uses the word *wife*. As Hagar is a slave who has been chosen to produce offspring for the continuance of the tribe, her status is not clearly defined by the word used.

Finally, in Genesis 21:1-8, against all the odds, the ageing Sarah and Abraham produced their heir, Isaac. Abraham married again after Sarah's death and, although he fathered more children by several concubines, these children did not inherit. They were recognized to a degree by being given grants to enable them to progress in life (Genesis 25:1-6). This convention demonstrates how the offspring of his first formally acknowledged marriage was recognized as the legitimate heir over other possible claimants. Abraham addressed his concerns about the legitimate transference of his property within his family, not to one born a slave Genesis 15: 2-6.

In Numbers 5:11-31 there is emphasis on the importance to the Jews of succession, inheritance, and purity. Because society is patriarchal it is not surprising that, in the quest for legitimacy and purity, there are specific recommendations for the identification and trial of suspected adulteresses, but not adulterers. Nevertheless,

---

<sup>9</sup> Giordani, *Social Message*, 185, 196-199.

<sup>10</sup> The use of the Hebrew word *issa*, meaning woman, to denote Hagar, can be construed as either wife or concubine. The scholars who produced the 1970 edition of The New American Bible settled on the use of concubine when referring to Hagar, and it is in this context that Hagar's treatment makes sense. In Galatians 4:21-26 Paul extrapolates this view.

the rules do recognize the possibility of false accusations of women and, in this context, provide for some form of socially recognized justice for the accused.

Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:1-12 decree the rights to property of heiresses when there are no direct male heirs. This indicates the overriding concern for legitimate inheritance and the tribal retention of property, recognized as God's will, endorsed by Moses, and effected by the covenant of marriage.

Numbers 30: 3-16 emphasises the dependant status of women in both family (when single) and in marriage, so that the father or husband can nullify any vows she might take. Women and children are seen, from a legal perspective, as subject to husband or father.

Leviticus 20:10-21 covers many legal aspects that affect marriage and begins: "If a man commits adultery with his neighbour's wife both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death". Leviticus 18:1-30 details the penalties for breaching God's covenant including penalties for forbidden sexual relations that might threaten marriage. They are more specific and more stringent than those recognized in Genesis at the time of Abraham and the contemporary influence of Hittite jurisprudence. The clear objective of the Law was to fulfil God's will and thereby for the Jews to remain a sacred people. "To me therefore you shall be sacred, for I the Lord am sacred, I who have set you apart from the other nations to be my own" (Leviticus 20:26).

As to be Jewish was to be sacred, so in order to ensure the purity of the line, no mixed marriages were to be undertaken, unless the non-Jewish partner converted. The Pauline Christian change to this rule was to accept the fact of a mixed marriage and pray for the possibility of the conversion of the non-Christian partner (1 Corinthians 12:14-16). This recognized the first-century reality that more often a Christian mixed marriage was the result of one of the parties to a marriage being converted after the marriage. This issue is addressed later in this thesis.

Deuteronomy 24:1-5 records laws relating to preserving the rights of a husband implicit in divorce, forbidding the former husband of a divorced woman to marry

her for a second time after the death of her second husband. Perhaps in this there is an element that protects women's property for her own protection.

Deuteronomy 25:11-12 gives us no doubt about the importance of preserving male potency for the future of the tribe. "When two men are fighting and the wife of one intervenes to save her husband from the blows of his opponent, if she stretches out her hand and seized the latter by his private parts, you shall chop off her hand without pity."

In similar vein, to ensure the continuity of the line, a newly wed man was exempted from military duty for one year (Deuteronomy 24:5).

Marriage for the Jews is a sacred covenant between a man and a woman, reflecting God's covenant with the Jewish people when he promised Abraham and Sarah that they would, together, have a child. The status of the woman in the contract appears not to be equal to that of the man, nevertheless it is a *sacred* bonding, not merely an ownership contract that treats her solely as property. God's blessing is sought to strengthen the bond and there are important instances of a loving spiritual relationship in the Bible, where husband and wife, together in old age, still have faith in God, for example, to grant them a child.

It is this religious view of marriage that helped protect Jewish women from the demeaning existence of women in other Semitic societies, and in the households of the surrounding Macedonian, Greek, Egyptian and Roman societies. It is noted by Giordani<sup>11</sup> that as the influence of religion weakened in these societies, so did the position of women. From equal status and legal rights in Egypt some 2300 years before Christ, women in normal society had become the property of a man, whether father, husband or brother, who could dispose of her as he wished. Giordani's discussion mentions that marriage was secularised in Egypt some 500 years before Christ. The laws of Hammurabi established that only male children had the right to inherit property, a daughter could be given in pawn to a creditor, a husband could reduce a wife to the status of slave if he wished to marry another and so on. In

---

<sup>11</sup> Giordani, *Social Message*, 183-218.

examining the cultural parameters of Jewish marriage in the first century, William Loader states:

It [the household] would need to be strong enough to sustain the children that joining [in matrimony] would inevitably bring into a world of inadequate contraception. For this reason, most men apparently married at around 30 years of age when they would have gained sufficient to be able to start such a household. It is probably no coincidence that the gospels give this as the age of Jesus when he chose his special path – instead of doing what most others did and marrying...Men married women who were 10-15 years younger. It made sense for fathers to seek to marry off their daughters while they were young. Leaving it too long exposed them to the danger of falling pregnant outside of marriage ... [thus] ... bringing shame on the father and his household. The view was widespread that women had limited control of their passions and so needed as soon as possible to be harnessed into a stable relationship.<sup>12</sup>

Giordani's<sup>13</sup> discussion on the nature of the family indicates that the second-class position of married women in Egyptian, Greek and Roman society of the first century was even worse than that of Jewish women. The laws of Solon (640-549 B.C.E.) had established in Greece that a woman remained the property of the head of the household and could be left in a will to someone other than her husband, with no right of redress. She could be sold on to another. The laws of Amasis ruler of Egypt's new empire of the same period as the Athenian lawgiver Solon, also gave the male head of the household similar rights. Whereas the marriage ceremony had been religious, Amasis secularised it. The legal notion that women were property and that any rights they had were rights devolved from the male that owned them pervaded the laws of Asia.

Although in Greece, as in Asia and Egypt, the woman remained under the legal guardianship of father, brother, husband or son, in Rome, the position of women of rank and beauty became more complex. In Rome, the *paterfamilias* had absolute authority over the women in his household, but by the first century a woman who had aristocratic antecedents, and who had inherited well, was often able to negotiate legal rights commensurate with her male equivalents; some simply

---

<sup>12</sup> Loader, *Making Sense*, 33. Gloss added.

<sup>13</sup> Giordani, *Social Message*, 185-186.



ignored the normal rules and got away with it. The Christian woman then appeared in this landscape, a disciple of the leader who could be seen by his actions to be challenging the comfortable preconceptions of gender and place. This aspect is developed later in this report.

### **Christian Marriage – a cultural challenge**

The first Christians were mostly practicing Jews, and in Jerusalem many conformed to the Mosaic Law while also following Christian principles and practices (Galatians 2:12). A prime example was James, who was eventually executed because his leadership was an embarrassment to the non-Christian Jews (Acts 12:1-4). When most non-Jewish converts to Christianity were accepted from the Romano-Hellenistic community and from Jews of the diaspora in Asia Minor, it was hotly debated how closely the Christian proselytes should conform to Jewish customs and rituals. In this context, it is possible to analyse how the Christian outlook on marriage, and the place of women in marriage, might differ from traditional Jewish practice. With regard to divorce, there were two Jewish schools of thought.

At the time of Jesus there were two conflicting currents of thought: the rigorist school of Shammai permitted divorce only in the case of adultery; the laxist school of Hillel allowed it for less serious faults such as burning a husband's food. This last interpretation, which was closer to tradition, prevailed and became authoritative ... in reality divorce was permitted for an indefinite number of reasons, even trivial ones, depending on the husband's will.

Finally, according to Deuteronomy, divorce was not only a right, but a duty when the wife was sterile or the husband impotent, or was in some way a source of vexation to her (Deut. 21:14).

From the point of view of unity, the Roman family was juridically superior to the Hebrew family, for it was solidly founded upon the principle of rigid monogamy: it was considered the fundamental nucleus of society and the state, and in a certain sense a divine institution, since it centred on the gods of the hearth and of the family.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Giordani, *Social Message*, 197, 199.

Giordani indicates that for the Roman, the family was viewed almost as a political entity, strongly hierarchical whereas the Christian family, following its Jewish precedent, was also hierarchical, but in a more religious mould. As mentioned earlier, it is the subject of scholarly discussion that the views on marriage held by Jesus in his lifetime, and by Paul following his conversion, appear to differ in some aspects, particularly on divorce. The comparative analysis of the writings in the New Testament below reveals the relevant issues.

## Gospels

The focus on marriage in the Gospels centres on the challenges to Christ himself from the custodians of Jewish Law of the day. Christ's responses are very specific and uncompromising, as befits one Rabbi disputing with others. Matthew and Mark both quote Christ as making the following points in response to questioning by the Pharisees.

- The Creator made them male and female for this reason ... the two shall become as one.<sup>15</sup>
- Let no man separate what God has joined.<sup>16</sup>
- Moses permitted divorce because of the stubbornness of men "*but at the beginning it was not that way.*"<sup>17</sup> And again: "*I now say to you, whoever divorces his wife (lewd conduct is a separate case), and marries another, commits adultery.*"<sup>18</sup>

The combination of these three aspects of Christ's words i.e. oneness, the permanence of the God-driven union, and Moses ruling on divorce being an exception, indicate that Jesus was firmly against divorce and there is no indication that there could be any departure from the male-female paradigm of marriage, or from being one-flesh in the sight of God, open to the procreation of children. Nevertheless, Jesus does mention that lewd conduct is a separate case. The translation of the Greek *porneia* as *lewd conduct* in the NAB version, was formerly

---

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-8.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 19:8; Mark 10:4-6. Emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11-12. Emphasis added.

*immorality* in the Douay-Rheims version and becomes *unchastity* in the NRSV translation. It is interesting that some early commentators, following the view of Jerome who was recognized as the foremost translator of the Bible into the Latin Vulgate, focused on fornication or adultery as the real meaning in this context.<sup>19</sup> The distinction might be argued that the exception clause indicates that Christ was merely recognizing the fact that the one-flesh link had been broken *de facto*? If the latter interpretation is correct, then one would need to distinguish between the possibilities that Christ accepted separation *de facto*, but not divorce as seen today.

The report in Matthew's Gospel has him adding (Matthew 19:11-12): "Not everyone can accept this teaching, only those to whom it is given to do so". And he went on: "some men are incapable of sexual activity from birth; some have been deliberately made so; and some there are who have freely renounced sex for the sake of God's reign." And finally, he said: "Let him accept the teaching who can." This last saying shows that Jesus himself envisaged and understood that there were sexual situations where humans would fail to live up to the marriage ideal recognized in the Jewish culture of his day. Indeed, does this indicate that Christ accepted a possible distinction between the ideal of religious law and the practicalities of evolving religious principles to be observed, where possible, by a recognisably weak humanity? Such a distinction would indicate the evolving possibility of a *Christianising* of Jewish belief. Given the limited reference in the scriptures, it would have been interesting to have been present at Jesus' full discussion with his questing disciples. Jesus recognized only divorce because of fornication or lewd conduct, and that as an exception to God's law because Moses recognized the weakness of men.

---

<sup>19</sup> Giordani, *Social Message*, 205; in her analysis of Paul's use of Greek to communicate within the culture of the time classics scholar and research fellow at Yale Divinity School, Sarah Ruden (*Paul among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*, 1st ed. [New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2010], 20-21), in the context of Paul's analogy of idolatry with adultery says he used the word *porneia* to signify crude, shallow and transactional fornication with human or animal, the act purporting to be religious but it was 'fictional' while alleged to be 'transcendent'.

## Cultural Change

Luke 20:27-39, examining the question of Levirate and serial marriages, frames marriage in the context of the after-life. In positing the case of a woman married seven times the Sadducees asked Jesus the tongue-in-cheek question: “at the resurrection, whose wife shall she be? Remember seven married her” (Luke 20:33). Christ tells the Sadducees, and us, there is no married state after death as the dead will become like the angels and not be subject to death again (Luke 20:36). The purpose of marriage, as seen by Jews at that time, was to provide heirs for the continuation of the family, hence, as no one is to die in the after-life, marriage would be obsolete.

This saying then raises two more questions for the modern Christian: is there a case today for viewing marriage as an institution differently from those times when the continuation of the human race appeared to be a paramount concern? And secondly, for a modern wife: *what about my loving relationship that exists now with my husband, will that no longer exist in the after-life?*

In the Gospel of John 8: 4-11 Jesus shows us how divine mercy works in the context of marriage. Despite a woman being accused of adultery and facing stoning by death by a religious mob outside the temple (under the guise of fulfilling the Law of Moses) Jesus saves her. He implements his commandment of overriding love and forgiveness – “if anyone here is without sin let him cast the first stone” (John 8:7). The crowd saw the point and melted away. Then Jesus exercises his pastoral authority: “Has no one condemned you, nor do I condemn you ... You may go, but from now on avoid sin” (John 8:10-11). No doubt this outcome annoyed the self-righteous Pharisees or Sadducees who engineered the situation. Christ in this instance did not condemn failure in marriage commitment, he counselled.

Was marriage considered an important part of human life for Christ on earth? John 2:1-11 tells the story of the wedding feast at Cana, the event celebrated as Christ’s first public miracle. The way the story is told, the miracle was performed rather grudgingly, and at the request of his mother, not spontaneously: “My time has not yet come” (John 2:4). Christ had the capacity and his mother saw the need. The

family would have lost face, or been shamed in the community, if the wine had run out before the celebration had run its natural course. The importance of kinship and the avoidance of family shame were constants in the cultural values of the time as noted earlier, particularly as related to marriage. There is no mention of Joseph so it might be assumed that Jesus, in his role as *paterfamilias* or head of the family, was prepared to accept the responsibility for the family reputation, and so performed the miracle even though he thought his time to reveal himself had not yet come (John 2:4). The request had come from his mother, indicating how, within Jesus' household, a woman could have significant influence over the *paterfamilias*.

### **The Changing Role of Women**

The mature Jesus, rabbi and itinerant preacher, showed great respect for Mosaic Law and the traditions of his people. However, a close look at his behaviour and his sayings indicates that he introduced a new dimension in his defiance of the current cultural attitudes to women within the context of marriage and public behaviour as shown in the marriage customs defined by the rabbinic writings of the time<sup>20</sup>. Cohick discusses the shift of meanings between the concepts of Jewish *mohar* 'bride price', to the Greek *pherne* 'dowry', as the Jewish customs, terms and understandings coalesced with the current Romano-Greek. The cultural attitudes are reflected in Jewish marriage contracts at the time.

Jewish contracts did not expect the couple to file for divorce, unlike the non-Jewish contracts that read as though divorce is a possible outcome. For example, the language in Jewish contracts discusses who will get the dowry money if the wife predeceases her husband and who will care for the wife. If the husband predeceases her. No mention is made of divorce. In non-Jewish contracts, however, divorce provisions are discussed but stipulations regarding the death of a spouse are not. The implication is that at least some Jewish families assumed marriage was

---

<sup>20</sup> Lynn Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009. Accessed June 4, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. Sourced UND 2018-06-04 00-07-43. Marriage in Rabbinic Writings. 37-42.

for life, while non-Jewish families assumed marriage was not a lifelong commitment. For those Jews who permitted polygyny, a man's fear that a wife would not be suitable is mitigated by the knowledge that he could marry another without divorcing the first . . .

Cohick sifts through the available evidence and finds the Jewish attitudes to divorce varied in both the expression of contracts and in actual behaviour.

The disagreement between the houses of Hillel and Shammai, as well as the discussions between Jesus and the Pharisees, suggest a climate where divorce was encountered with enough frequency to warrant debate.... Distinctive practices probably fell along social or class ranks as well as along religious lines.

It appears that Jesus' respect for the role of women in the community and the family, appeared to be counter-cultural in both the Jewish and Romano-Hellenic environments of the time. (John 4:27). Cohick's points out that from Sifre Deuteronomy 269, the houses of Hillel and Shammai in their discussion of Deuteronomy 24:1, differed regarding Moses' grounds for divorce. The Shammai view, was that divorce was only acceptable in the event of the woman being unchaste, whereas Hillel regarded divorce as acceptable even if the woman spoilt his broth. These views were reflected in Jesus' discussion with his disciples, when his strictly Shammai view is found confusing by his apostles who, as unsophisticated ordinary people, seemed to accept the Hillel view. (Matthew 19:9; Mark 10: 2-12; Luke 16:18).<sup>21</sup>

As will be shown in the following analysis, the way Jesus treated women publicly had important significance for Christian women in marriage at that time. Did Christianity introduce more freedom for women in the roles they played in their households and later in the communities of home churches that arose around the Mediterranean? As indicated earlier, the freedom Christian women enjoyed was in stark contrast to their position in the ancient cultures surrounding Roman Palestine,

---

<sup>21</sup> Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life*. 60-63.

Syria and Asia, and indeed in the more sophisticated cultures of Greece and Rome themselves.

Jewish practices, based on rabbinic interpretations of the Law, tended to stress the subservient role of women in society and in the family generally. Jesus' attitude towards and treatment of women, including married women, gives an indication of how he expected his followers to continue with his acceptance of women as worthy of respect and a more open and public presence.

The Jewish Talmud around the turn of the first century openly denigrated and demeaned the women and limited their direct involvement in religious life. Janice Nunnally-Cox in *Foremothers* instances these quotes:

Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman ... Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her lasciviousness (Eliezer. 1ct Rabbi). *From the Talmud*: Let a curse come upon the man whose wife or children say grace for him. *And included in the daily prayers was this thanksgiving*: Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praise be God that he has not created me an ignorant man.<sup>22</sup>

Although women could attend synagogue for major festivals they had their own area set aside behind a screen, sometimes in a gallery, could not read aloud and they were not numbered in the attendance. They were not expected to recite their daily prayers and basically were confined to traditional household practices regarding women. In her examination of history, Nunnally-Cox first gives the traditional Jewish view, and contrasts Jesus' behaviour:

Rabbis did not speak to women in public, nor did they greet their own wives, daughters or mothers. The function of a married woman was to manage the household and bear and raise children. Women were not permitted to divorce their husbands, although the opposite was true and relatively easy.<sup>23</sup> The references to the importance of women in Jesus' life as reported in the Gospels, gain great

---

<sup>22</sup> Nunnally-Cox, *Foremothers*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> Nunnally-Cox, *Foremothers*, 100 – 113.

significance when measured against the prevailing status of women in Jewish society at that time. Nunnally-Cox's listings of Christ's departures from Jewish Law out of pastoral concern for women are summarised as follows, not quoted in full. He treats women with respect, ignoring the Mosaic laws surrounding women's menstruation and persistent bleeding (Mark 5:25-34; Matthew 9:20-22; Luke 8:43-48; Leviticus 15:25-30); ignores the strictures on talking to women in public, and particularly non-Jewish women (Mark 7:25-30; Matthew 15:21-28); forgives sinful women, restoring their sense of worth and dignity (Luke 7:36-50; Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; John 12:1-8); prefers the instruction of women over their attending to their home duties (Luke 10: 8-42; John 11:1-44; John 12:1-8); accepts the support and ministrations of married women amongst the disciples and in their homes (Luke 8:1-3); heals a broken woman on the Sabbath, giving her the dignified title *daughter of Abraham*, provoking the ire of the Pharisees (Luke 13:10-17); opens a conversation at a communal well with a Samaritan woman and inspires her to be a missionary to her people (John 4:1-42); protects a woman caught in adultery from being stoned to death, by alerting her would-be killers to their own sinfulness, then assures her that she is forgiven (John 7:53; 8:11; contra. Deuteronomy 22:22; Numbers 5:16).

The woman named a disciple and mentioned more than any other woman in the Gospels is Mary Magdalene. Whether she was a reformed prostitute or courtesan has been debated for centuries, though the only mention of her past in the Gospels is that seven demons were expelled from her (Luke 8:2). Former sinner or not, Mary was the loyal follower of Jesus who was present at the crucifixion on Friday and who went to the tomb to anoint the hastily abandoned body of Jesus on the Sunday after the Sabbath. The risen Jesus revealed himself to Mary first; she believed and was to tell the other disciples (John 20: 11-18). Giordani<sup>24</sup> calls Mary Magdalene *the Apostle of the Apostles*, a nod to her pre-eminent apostolic role as the messenger of the Resurrection. How did the apostles and the other male disciples respond to Jesus' behaviour towards women? In John 4:27 the Gospel writer says that the disciples were astonished when Jesus spoke to the Samaritan

---

<sup>24</sup> Giordani, *Social Message*, 193.



woman at the well. The Gospel reports that it was she who led the citizens of the nearby town to come and listen to Jesus. In that sense she became an evangelist.

We hear nothing in the Gospels of the activities of the wives of the married disciples. Their ministrations are background information, rather like the ignored presence of women in the synagogues. The reports of the number of followers fed by the miracle of the loaves and fishes ignores numbering as related to women and children. We are told there were 5000 men *plus women and children*. It is almost as though the numbers of women were irrelevant.

The Jewish patriarchal view of family and marriage would fit in with this style of reporting, raising the question about how the disciples were actually responding to Jesus' different treatment of women. The precedence given to men was justified at the time by the interpretation of Genesis that the creation of man preceded woman because woman was derived from the body of man who had been formed first from dust (Genesis 2:21-25). This interpretation, of the revised oral history, was inconsistent with the earlier version of Genesis that talked about the creation of humankind, male and female at the one time (Genesis 1:26-27).

After Christ's resurrection, and his revelations to his disciples, Christianity grew; and it appears from Acts and various epistles, that women were being recognized in roles outside the home. The letters of Paul and those attributed to him refer to important roles women were playing in the house churches and new religious communities of the Christian Jews and gentiles in the regions of the diaspora.

## **Epistles**

As this analysis moves from the direct message of Jesus as contained in the Gospels, to the teachings of the apostles in the Epistles, the continuing presence of the ancient Jewish traditions permeating the discourse can be detected. 1 Peter 3: 1-7 the Apostle re-enforces that the ideal qualities of a wife are reflected in a humble and subservient disposition, and that a husband should honour the 'weaker sex'.

Marriage at that time, for people other than the very wealthy and the ruling elite, was not a matter for state or religious concern. The one necessary ingredient was commitment to each other. On the other hand, the law, Roman or Jewish, was concerned with the marriage contract as it related to property and inheritance, and the enhancement of social prospects. Divorce was not uncommon in the Romano-Greek world of the first century.<sup>25</sup> In this context it is relevant that the early Christians, when predominantly still practicing Jews, had to become one in the community with the Greeks and Romans who included slaves, servants and, in some cases, masters (1 Timothy 6:2). The very nature of the Christian community and by extension, the Christian household challenged the prevailing nature of the household as understood in the first-century cultures of the Mediterranean regions. However, the household code as delivered in Colossians 3: 18 - 4:1 and the new Christian order of inclusiveness quoted in Galatians 3:25-29 indicate how a dramatic social change, implicit in the perfect practice of Pauline and post-Pauline Christianity, did not necessarily imply a change in the social order. Patriarchal authority and the acceptance of slavery could still apply. Fiorenza discusses these aspects fully in chapter seven of *In Memory of Her*, and she states:

While a few scholars think that the demands for the obedience and submission of wives, children and slaves are genuinely Christian, the majority sees the domestic code as a later Christian adaptation of a Greco-Roman or Jewish-Hellenistic philosophical-theological code ... the household code in Colossians is a slightly Christianized version of a Stoic ethical code.<sup>26</sup>

In 1 Corinthians, Paul's emphasis on marriage moved away from Jewish concerns with property and inheritance and the production of heirs, to a more personal focus on sexuality. This in itself reflected the impact on the early Christians of the prevailing sexual excesses publicly apparent in the wider Romano-Hellenic community.

---

<sup>25</sup> Cohick *Wives and the realities of Marriage*. Passim.

<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. (NY: Crossroad 1983). 254.

In 1 Corinthians 7:1-40, written between 53 and 56 C.E., Paul in his advice to the married, characterises marriage as:

- A way to avoid sexual immorality, and
- Necessary, in order to achieve equally satisfactory conjugal relations for both husband and wife.

For the unmarried he recommended staying in that state to avoid the distractions that might distance them from serving God. They should avoid the complications that arise out of the demands of a partner. It should be remembered that Paul was speaking in the context of Christians waiting for the end of the world and the second coming of Christ. St Paul indicated his belief in the immanence of the second coming, *Parousia*, by the way he gave advice that encouraged putting aside legal issues and sexual pressures in favour of asceticism, and thus being ready and worthy to be judged with the elect. In 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 he tells the Corinthians to avoid the law courts and behave, sinners will be judged by the elect.

There is also a pastoral and practical side to the exhortations of Paul. In Timothy 5:11-14 he shows concern that young widows should re-marry. He reasons that, in that way they can be provided for, without being tempted to stray, and without being a burden on the communal purse that, in his view, should be called on only to help widows over 60.

In his analysis of Pauline theology, John Ziesler<sup>27</sup> concludes that Paul is not anti-sex, as some have alleged, but anti-being-distracted from concentrating on the Parousia. In addition to this is Paul's focus on marriage as a preventative for sexual sin. Paul understands the need for commitment in marriage. His comments imply that, if you must marry, do so with a good conscience, but if you need not, don't. Paul strongly deprecates abstinence from sex in marriage, unless it is for short periods in order to concentrate on prayer (1 Corinthians 7:5). Paul's views on divorce reflect a rather pragmatic attitude that varies somewhat from both the

---

<sup>27</sup> John Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity*. Oxford Bible Series., edited by Ackroyd, P. R. and Stanton, G.N. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990). Passim

existing Jewish practices that were not uniform and from the views expressed by Jesus in the Gospels.

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 Paul states that, the wife should not separate from the husband and the husband should not divorce the wife. He says this is the lord's command. However, he also accepts that a wife could separate from her husband, but she should remain unmarried, and might even reconcile with her husband. So far this reflects the orthodox views proposed by Jesus. However, it can be distinguished from the Jewish view of the law (Deuteronomy 24:4), that a husband should not take back a divorced wife, even had he married again and become widowed. The one form of divorce open to the Jewish wife was in fact separation. This opens up a grey area for interpretation of the nature of divorce as understood within the Jewish culture at the time.

Shammai and Hillel quoted earlier represented the two poles; Shammai only recognized adultery as sufficient justification for divorce whereas Hillel's interpretation was almost as lax as the Roman. In upper-class Roman society, when men and women who had agreed to marry, decided they wished to divorce or separate, either party could walk away from the marriage. As noted previously, for Christians the situation was more complex, bearing in mind that for all persons in the Roman hegemony religion and politics, faith and power, were intertwined and embedded in each other.<sup>28</sup>

Paul's point of difference from the hard-line Jewish understanding of the Law reflected a transition to Christianity in that a believing husband or wife should not divorce a non-believing partner, but should consent to live with the non-believer, because, by good example, they might convert them. In 1 Corinthians 7:15 he did add that should the unbelieving partner separate, then "let it be so. The believing husband or wife is not bound in such cases. God has called you to live in peace." This is an acceptance of separation as divorce though it is not certain that he approved that a divorced/separated person could marry again.

---

<sup>28</sup> K. C. Hanson, and Douglas. E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 20-23.

Paul's ruling here, on marriage and divorce also states that the children of a couple who accept each other for what they are, irrespective of their being converted, are *holy* (1 Corinthians 7:14). This would be of paramount consideration for Christian families, whether Jewish or not in their cultural origins.

Paul's view of the ideal Christian household as expressed in Ephesians 5: 21-33 and 6:1-9 is expressed within the context of the prevailing culture. The structure looks normal, but Paul's theology emphasises the profoundly deep spirit of service involving love and sacrifice that transcends the individual person, whether husband or wife, slave or master. To illustrate this, he uses the analogy of Christ's loving and total sacrifice for his ekklesia, the community that is the church, the body that is our own and his. In Ephesians 5:22-27 Paul uses the analogy of the reciprocal duties of the husband and wife as the model for Christ surrendering himself for the Church and so washing her clean of sin, without spot or wrinkle. The submission and intimacy within marriage represents the relationship that should exist between the Church and Christ.

### **Paul's marriage analogies reflect the essential trust in marriage**

As the Apostle of the Gentiles, Paul's views on the importance of marriage pervades his quest for loyalty and trust in the growing disparate Christian communities. Lucien Cerfaux<sup>29</sup> comments on Paul's varied use of the marriage analogy in several epistles. In 1 Corinthians 7:32-34 Paul tells the members of the Church in Corinth that they should be as the unmarried woman or girl in body and spirit, anxious about the affairs of the Lord. Then in 2 Corinthians 11:2 he tells the Corinthians he betrothed them to one husband to present them as a chaste virgin to Christ. He portrays himself as the friend of the bridegroom ready to present her (the church) to Christ as the one who has assumed responsibility for her chastity.

---

<sup>29</sup> Lucien Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of Saint Paul* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1967), 319-321.

To illustrate his point that Christians are newly justified by faith rather than by adherence to the Mosaic Law, Paul in Romans 7:1-4 argues that the Christian position relative to Jewish law is the same as that of the woman who is freed by the death of her husband and may join with another husband. Freedom is paramount in this analogy – just as death dissolves the bond between the married couple, so Christ’s death dissolved the bond of the Jewish Christian to the Law of Moses.

Paul pushes the marriage analogy further in 1 Corinthians 6:15-20. Marriage implies sexual union and the Genesis quotation “they shall be two in one flesh” would infer that to be unfaithful by joining oneself to a prostitute is to take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute. Rather ... “he who is united to the Lord makes one spirit with him.”

In Romans 7:1-6 Paul also makes use of the marriage analogy to argue that, by becoming Christians, Jewish converts become dead to the Mosaic Law and the notion of sins created by non-observance; they are then free to marry again, that is become married to the way shown by Jesus. Paul introduces a second analogy; they are no longer slaves to the old written code but free in the new life of the Spirit.

### **Wider Cultural Understanding of Divorce**

Divorce was mandated for adultery in Roman and Greek law<sup>30</sup> at that time and was also the remedy for adultery then favoured by the Jews, despite hard-liners opting for death, as was the earlier requirement (Leviticus 20:10-21). Matthew’s gospel refers to Joseph as an ‘upright man’ being prepared to divorce Mary quietly (Matthew 1:18-25). However, as discussed in Mark 10:2-12, Christ in his confrontation with the Pharisees rejected divorce as contrary to the will of God as expressed in the Genesis creation story.

---

<sup>30</sup> Loader, "Did Adultery Mandate Divorce?" 67-78; Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine*, 43-46; Diarmid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 119.

In his book *The New Testament with Imagination*, William Loader puts the view that Jesus' view was countering lax practice at the time, and that "If the focus is always what is good for people ... we may miss the true emphasis of Jesus' teaching if we take his sayings about divorce as rigid law."<sup>31</sup> Loader discusses Deuteronomy 24 and its incidental reference to a certificate of divorce that would enable a woman to marry again, but she could not then return to her husband. Loader writes:

That passage cites the bizarre situation of a woman being divorced once and then either widowed or divorced from a second husband and then returning to a first husband. Such a return was forbidden. This reflected the widespread belief that sexual intercourse with someone other than your husband made you unclean for your husband and so the marriage must cease. This lies behind the words, "except for unchastity or sexual immorality", meaning except in cases of adultery. So, the view of Jesus was: no divorce except where it has to happen because of adultery. A person divorced on illegitimate grounds cannot marry again because the first marriage is still intact and so they would be committing adultery.<sup>32</sup>

Loader raises the question of reconciliation within the Christian context:

Jesus' message of grace and reconciliation challenges the old cultural assumption that adultery should automatically lead to the termination of a marriage. Reconciliation and forgiveness [are] possible.<sup>33</sup>

However, in the years between the death of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem, when Christianity was part of Judaism, the developing nature of Christian views on marriage and divorce, would likely create tensions and problems, contributing to wider social unrest.

Those Hellenistic Jews who later became Christians were somewhat different to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem in that the Hellenised Jews became one in community with non-Jewish Christian converts. As discussed earlier, resulting

---

<sup>31</sup> William Loader, *The New Testament with Imagination: A Fresh Approach to Its Writings and Themes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 20.

<sup>32</sup> Loader, *Imagination*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Loader, *Imagination*, 20.

issues pertinent to observance of Mosaic Law came to Jerusalem mid-century to be discussed and decided on by an assembly of Christians under Peter and James, later known as the Council of Jerusalem or Apostolic Council (48/49 or 43/44 C.E.). Marriage and divorce issues are not subjects recorded as needing discussion at that time (Acts 15:1-35), though it was recorded that the faithful must abstain from *porneia*, variously translated as fornication, lewdness, immorality or unchastity. The diversity in Jewish society sheltered the emerging Christian sect from immediate confrontation with their fellow Jews; but differences opened up between those refugee and migrant Jews who fled Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., and their more laissez-faire Hellenistic Jewish cousins, who were settled comfortably in the Roman provinces of Asia and Syria.

### **Linguistic Cultural Analysis**

Re-examination of biblical texts to factor-in newly acquired scholars' cultural and linguistic analysis, is also promoting changing understanding of the scriptural references to marriage and divorce. In her journal article, *Biblical Interpretation and the Epistle to the Ephesians*, Lisa Baumert<sup>34</sup> applies a linguistic cultural analysis. As referenced earlier by Cerfeaux, Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians 5:22-23 seeks to elucidate his model of Christian marriage. Baumert takes the analysis further by applying a linguistic examination, but first alludes to the importance of cultural and linguistic context.

In Ephesians 5:23 Paul utilizes (both) a metaphor and a simile when he states ... *because the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of his body the church, as well as its saviour.*

In Ephesians 5: 25 he says: *Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church, and in 5: 28: Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies.*

The relationships between wives and husbands, slaves and masters, and children and fathers were essential and important within the Roman household of the first

---

<sup>34</sup> Lisa Baumert, "Biblical Interpretation and the Epistle to the Ephesians," *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 2 (2011): 22-25.



century. Baumert makes the point that Paul in Ephesians 4:2 and 5:21 called on the whole church to accept Christ's leadership enabling Christians to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, in a life of perfect humility, meekness and patience.

In examining Paul's analogy using *head* as metaphor for Christ's relationship with his body, the church, Baumert notes that his references to the husband as being one flesh with his wife is often interpreted in the hierarchical manner as something that would fit the times. Baumert challenges this view on linguistic grounds as inadequate and missing the point.

Rather than indicating hierarchy and therefore wives' submission to husbands, the Greek word *kephale* (used for head in the original Greek version of the epistle) in this context is properly understood to convey the ideas of *dependence* and *unity* and can be translated as *source* ... *Kephale* was also used to indicate those who willingly sacrificed themselves in battle by leading the charge ... This is consistent with Paul's metaphorical assertion that Christ is the *kephale* of the church.

Baumert here is stressing that Paul promotes Christ's *leadership* of the church ahead of his *authority* over the church.

Proceeding to examine another Greek word, *arche*, Baumert says that:

This was the word used in Paul's time to convey the hierarchical ideas of *leader or ruler*, as well as *point of origin and beginning* ... Greek culture of Paul's time would have expected the use of the word *arche* ... The word *arche* is contained in the derived English word *hierarchical*.

By using *kephale* Paul is saying that, just as Christ is the *source* of the church, so too the husband became the *source* of his wife's existence when God used Adam's rib to create Eve.<sup>35</sup>

Baumert concludes:

---

<sup>35</sup> Lisa Baumert, "Biblical Interpretation," 22-25.

<sup>85</sup> Sarah Ruden, *Paul among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2010), 96-99.

Therefore, the analogy between the relationship of Christ and the church and husbands and wives is found in the idea of *source and unity*, rather than the commonly interpreted idea of *hierarchy*.

This would square with Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 where he stresses that a man must respect the rights of women in marriage equally with his own. Never-the-less he mentions the man's duties first. In Ephesians 5:24 he is much more specific about the leading role of the man: "As the church submits to Christ so should wives submit to husbands in everything." Paul stresses the equality of responsibilities in the marriage partnership, irrespective of gender. His is not the traditional patriarchal view.

Classics scholar Sarah Ruden<sup>36</sup> points out that Paul, as a Hellenised Jew and Roman citizen was at home in the *Pax Romana* of his time, but, as a religious man and a former Pharisee, was not at home in its excesses. Having been brought up in the Quaker-style Puritan tradition, Ruden herself confidently defends Paul against the accusation of being a Puritan as used by the Puritans in their models for the post-reformation church. She believes that Paul's message was misunderstood and misconstrued. Ruden also takes issue with those literary scholars of the ilk of George Bernard Shaw and the way they purported to interpret and comment on Paul's alleged puritanical take on life.

Like Shaw, most westerners tend to take Paul, with his preference for celibacy, as grim and negative, urging people to give up the greatest human joys for a chilly, lonely, religious life. This mistake comes partly from an assumption that erotic, mutually nurturing marriage was a ready option for Paul's followers, when actually he was calling them away from either the tyranny of arranged unions or the cruelty of sexual exploitation or ... both.<sup>37</sup>

Ruden says that marriage or divorce *for spiritual purposes* was unheard of in Mediterranean society before Christianity and was also entirely against Greco-Roman norms.<sup>38</sup> There was a power-based distinction in the way, divorce, or rather

---

<sup>37</sup> Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 97.

<sup>38</sup> Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 113.

permanent separation operated. In the Roman language of divorce, the Roman wife would *separate* from the husband, the only divorce-like option open to her; in contrast the husband could just *throw-out* the wife on the street, the divorce option open to him, as he was legally entitled to do.<sup>39</sup>

By analysing the language used by Paul and the way key words denoting *persons* rather than *male or female* have been translated<sup>40</sup>; analysing how the language of commerce has been adapted to spiritual relationships<sup>41</sup>; and how military usage has been adapted to church<sup>42</sup>; Ruden raises important questions of cultural understanding that have sometimes been ignored in popular exegesis. By using her own acknowledged language translations of classics Ruden is able to comment on how Paul adapted Greek to express the new concepts of Christianity. Ruden demonstrates the even-handedness of Paul in what, up to then, had been a male-dominated understanding of marriage. For example, she points out that Paul uses the same word for divorce for both husband and wife. That is the word that implies throwing out or discarding the partner, rather than merely separating<sup>43</sup>.

Ruden discusses what sort of issues this raised for Christians in the first-century environment. In the social climate of Rome, a disaffected wife had no real rights to a husband's property or maintenance. If a wife had no family to return to, the husband, as noted above, could throw her out on the street. As paterfamilias, he also had the right to dispose of his children and slaves the same way, because they were his property. He actually had the legal power of life or death over children and slaves, though not necessarily over his wife.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 113.

<sup>40</sup> Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 98.

<sup>41</sup> Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 106, 107, 143

<sup>42</sup> Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 127, 129, 141; cf. Romans 3.

<sup>43</sup> Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 113.

<sup>44</sup> Barrett, *Writings from Ancient Greece and Rome*, 40-41. Barrett publishes translations of Roman papyrus contracts of marriage and divorce as well as a letter from a serving soldier husband to his wife that illustrate the strong connection between property and marriage. The soldier actually instructs his wife that should her child be born a male he should be kept and if a female she be exposed to death.

With regard to inheritance, Ruden again shows how the changing Christian meaning of common words in Paul's language impacted the current cultural environment. The concept of marrying to one's advantage, to gain inheritance for one's continuing family, was accepted in Rome and Antioch and Jerusalem then, as it is understood now. But the Pauline language of inheritance, following that of Jesus, introduced a whole new perspective, not only to the upper classes who might inherit, but to workers, artisans and others, including slaves, who could only dream.

Christianity offered anyone, no matter how poor and powerless, an alternative inheritance, another kind of home, a new way to belong. In this light Paul's message is strongly positive: not 'Obey strictures against human nature, or we'll kick you out of the inheritance you were born into'. But instead, 'We offer you an equal share of a community, such as most of you could only dream of before. You forfeit it only if you are disorderly, through these destructive acts that are not even attractive in comparison to the life you could be leading'.

When Paul uses the word 'love'...this love is *agape* (a word not often used before the New Testament). It is selfless love, as opposed to the common Greek word *philia*, which meant the exclusive love of one's own circle, and *eros* which meant erotic love.<sup>45</sup>

Ruden goes on to examine each of the fruits of the spirit in the Christian context demonstrating how the meaning of the words gained different and deep spiritual dimension in the Pauline usage. He focuses on the use of the word 'faith' or 'fidelity' in both Greek and Latin and how that word then, was full of meanings related to 'old-fashioned trust'; an essential for Christian marriage.

With regard to 'trust', Ruden demonstrates that Christianity introduced the concept of trust coming from *agape* or selfless love. She lists opposing forces in language that shows the contrast between the Christian view of the world and the realities of life at the time as seen and expressed by Paul: True liberty versus self-indulgence; Love and service versus flesh; Love and law versus tearing one another apart; Spirit versus flesh, spirit versus compulsion or burden of the law; Christ versus flesh,

---

<sup>45</sup> Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 37-38.

'affections' and 'lust' (= passions and self-indulgence); Spirit versus egotism and resentment.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 40.

## **CHAPTER IV: MARRIAGE & THE HEALTH OF THE STATE**

The Christian view of marriage was at odds with the selfishness that was impacting the Romano-Hellenic world and threatening natural families and the need to produce heirs to continue the healthy life of families and the State. Of its own nature, it supported the classic view that healthy marriage and family were the foundation blocks of a healthy State. This synergy was not always apparent as an examination of the literature shows.

Ruden, Malina and Loader confirm that men were generally not established enough in life to marry before they were 30 and most women were promised as early as 12 or 13, as this was in order to ensure, as Ruden says, that they were still virgins and fit for breeding in a proper family. So, fathers continued to have the right to arrange the marriages of their daughters for the good of the family.

Although Paul leaves the way open to choose celibacy as his preferred Christian way, given the anticipated Parousia, he insists on equal right for the partners in marriage to achieve their sexual expressions of love (1 Corinthians 7:4-5).

In order to develop an in-depth picture of marriage as envisaged by the early Christians it is relevant to further explore the conditions surrounding marriage and divorce in the wider first-century environment

### **Roman Society**

In the heart of Rome, the Emperor Augustus had grown increasingly concerned at the weakening effect of moral laxity on the core strength of the Roman State. The first century of Christianity coincided with an era of pervasive sexual corruption in the Roman Empire and it is significant that the Julian reform-of-marriage laws proposed by Caesar in *De Maritandis Ordinibus*, (circa 18 B.C.E.) could not be introduced for almost 40 years and were finally made law and put to work by the Emperor Augustus when he added incentives for marriage and raising a family. The problem was that many of the Roman elite had embraced a luxurious lifestyle that militated against marriage and family responsibilities.

Roman historians Livy and Justin, in condemnation of their own period formulated the view, subsequently pervasive in Roman consciousness, that in Rome's early years of formation, in the mid-first-millennium B.C.E., the manly virtues were grounded on a demanding agricultural existence, disinclination towards luxury, and preparedness to fight for the freedom Rome bestowed upon its citizens. Women were modest and supported their men. The classical sources, Tacitus' *Annals* and *Histories*, Suetonius' books on the *Twelve Caesars*, supported by other historians Appian and Dio Cassius, detail the gradual decline in manly virtues, the excessive vanity of such emperors as Caligula, Nero and Domitian and the movement towards a more opulence-centred oriental culture.<sup>1</sup>

Justin writes that the highest dignity for a man was fatherhood. Justin refers to "Paternal majesty ... [by fatherhood, a man] thereby obtained his full complement of rights thus becoming sovereign lord of his household".<sup>2</sup> As previously noted, a father had the power of life and death over slaves, children and even wives in certain circumstances. On the other-hand a wife also gained dignity and became the "mistress of the family fireside" certain of respect outside the home, and matrons were especially seated at feasts and shows.<sup>3</sup> Even consuls had to defer to them.

In the Roman hegemony of the first century the 'household' was the symbol of status and achievement and it became the focus for Christian house-churches. The women of the household who had the independence and the will, were able to make their homes centres for Christians, regardless of sex, or status. Halvor Moxnes<sup>4</sup> points out that in the advanced agrarian societies that characterized the Roman hegemony, politics and kinship dominated relationships, but that religion and economics at that time were also embedded in politics and kinship.

---

<sup>1</sup> C.K. Barrett Ed., *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins*, (San Francisco, Harper Collins 1989), 1-21

<sup>2</sup> Fouard, *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity*, 292.

<sup>3</sup> Fouard, *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity*, 293.

<sup>4</sup> Moxnes, Halvor, ed. *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*. London: Routledge, 1997. Accessed May 29, 2028. ProQuest Ebook Central. UNDA 2018-05-29 05:51:00. 19.

Moxnes draws attention to the terminology, the Greek word *oikos*, the Latin words *domus* and *familia* that still inform the English language today. He says that these words were primarily used of large households of prosperous people who had slaves, servants and dependants. "We know much less about the family life of poor people, how slaves formed family-like groups."<sup>5</sup>

Kristina Sessa in her paper on *Domestic Conversions: Household and Bishops in the Late Antique Papal Legends*, discusses the place of the household and the *paterfamilias* in the first and subsequent centuries:

Cicero's famous study of the ideal statesman emphasized the importance of a well-run *domus* (household) while Xenophon and later Paul, underlined household management, *oikonomia* (the English word economics derives from this), as constitutive of a man's duty to his family, to his community, and to his god. Both the classical and the Christian models of the household as cornerstone of social, economic, and religious life reflect the central place of the domestic sphere in the ancient Mediterranean world. A space that was at once public and private, the household was the site of child-rearing, the disciplining of slaves, religious worship, business and entertainment ... The household was a performance and a ceremonial space, the site of the production and reproduction of the empire's most essential resources: bodies, property and reputation.<sup>6</sup>

In the Imperial period however, Rome had forsaken its discipline and simplicity.

The contemporary writer Polybius wrote:

The Romans live a life of strange disorder. The young people allow themselves to be drawn into the most shameful excesses. They spend their time at public shows and banquets; indulge in spendthrift tastes and in licentiousness of every description, taking pattern, only too evidently from what they learned among the Greeks during the war against Perseus.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Moxnes *Early Christian Families*. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Kristina Sessa, "Domestic Conversions: Households and Bishops in the Late Antique 'Papal Legends'," in *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300-900*, eds. Kate Cooper and Julia Hillner (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Polybius, *Historiae*, xxxii. 11.



The Greek reference here is firstly to the abuse of symposia where men drank themselves into a state of irresponsibility and irrationality and then hit the streets to party on publicly with their flute girls. Plutarch refers to this drunken debauchery, and it was what Paul was seeking to warn against when he used the word *komos* as something the Christians should avoid. The second reference is to pederasty, often celebrated in Greek poetry, and which, became quite common amongst the wealthy Romans. This is attested to in the writings of Cato, Sallust, Livy, Pliny and Justinian as quoted by Fouard:

[they] depict vice at Rome as devoid of even that surface polish of grace and elegance which made it so seductive in other lands ... Marriage and its sterner responsibilities inspired disgust in this worn-out generation. He quotes Pliny: *No children, no lasting and fruitful unions. Their only boast is of their barrenness. Day by day family life declined in influence, and with it the nerve and sinew of Rome.*<sup>8</sup>

When Augustus finally succeeded in introducing the new marriage laws his incentives ensured that a married person without children could only inherit half of the estate. Unmarried youths could only inherit from family, not from other benefactors. The man who had three children had unrestricted rights to bequests, a double share of public distributions, exemptions from duties, a rapid rise to public honours and an eminent place in society. The moral environment affecting society in the first century Roman hegemony reflected change from monogamy towards serial monogamy; from commitment to the procreation of children to replacement with self-centred gratification; from consolidation of family fortunes to pre-nuptial property agreements; and the manipulation of civil benefits away from the focus on family to a focus on individual benefits.

How did Christianity sit within this culture? Amongst the wealthy and enlightened the fashionable philosophical schools of the Stoics and Epicureans offered a rational way of dealing with human appetites and excess. The stoic tenets of Seneca can read like a Christian manual recommending a perfect life.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Catonis Fragmenta*; Sallust, *Historiarum Fragmenta*, i.9; Livy, xxv, 40; xxxiv, 4; Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, xxxiii, 18; xxxiv, 8; Justin, xxxvi, 4, as quoted by Fouard. *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity*, 295.

Indeed, Seneca preaches, with no less force than Saint Paul, on the contempt of riches and the consolation of poverty and suffering. To the mind of the Philosopher, as to the Apostle's, life appears as a time of trial, a warfare, the body a prison, and death a deliverance ... the wise man ... must shun the world and its pleasures, mortify the flesh, heal the evil that lurks in his soul; and to that end he must live in himself, examine his conscience nightly, purify his heart, and thus rise in higher, freer flight towards heaven...[and on charity] ... The unfortunate man is a sacred object ... we must lend a hand to the shipwrecked man, direct the strayed wanderer on his way, and share our bread with the hungry ... we are members of the same body, members of God.<sup>9</sup>

Saint Paul acknowledged that the pagans knew all that reason could discover about God ... his visible perfections, his eternal power and divinity, but they rejected him (Romans 1: 18-37). In this regard, it should be noted that for the pagan philosophers, the supreme God and Nature were one and the same.<sup>10</sup> Fashionable Epicurus and Zeno the Stoic had become the first century mentors in opposing philosophies. Epicurus' followers embraced peaceful and passive pleasures seeking life without worries, whereas the sterner view of life was taught by Zeno. By the end of Augustus' reign Zeno's philosophy was gaining the ascendancy. Fouard comments, however, that Zeno's oriental gloss on Greek stoicism did little to moderate the sexual excesses of the time because it included a pantheistic take on Nature as God; in his view, it was equally acceptable to mortify the flesh as it was to take part in whatever excesses nature called us to. Any means to attain a state of 'impassiveness' was lawful and any act allowable. Under the guise of following Nature, Zeno's followers authorized the very practices they taught were wrong.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Fouard, *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity*, 315, 316 gives detailed references for these quotes in Seneca's epistles and supporting references from St Jerome and Tertullian.

<sup>10</sup> Zeno, *Fragments* in J von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 1 (1964), 175,176. Barrett, *NT Background*. 66-81.

<sup>11</sup> Fouard, *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity*, 315-316.

Christianity appeared on the scene and was welcomed by some Romans as a new type of mystical stoicism, a morally safe harbour that was an acceptable alternative to licentious behaviour. Though outwardly, to some, Christianity was a form of stoicism, it had at its core a belief in God as a personal creator and personal redeemer, a God who promised resurrection and a place in the eternal kingdom to come in the after-life. However, later in the first century, to worship in the Christian manner brought political problems as, unlike the Jews that once they were seen to be, they were not exempt from obeying the laws regarding honouring and worshipping the household and local gods and the divinized Emperor.

Christian belief was seen by some authorities to be strong, counter-cultural and illegal. An example related to marriage. By Roman law only Roman citizens could marry and have legitimate children, so slaves could not marry; and any children that resulted from relationships were owned as slaves by the owners of the slaves who produced them.<sup>12</sup> Christians however treated slaves, as equals before God and free to have families. Children of Christian marriage were 'holy' (1 Corinthians 7:14). This would have created social pressures within the established Roman household.

It is recognised that Christians were not seeking to be social reformers in the modern sense, neither were they rebellious: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 24:25) could be seen as Christ's way around a very sensitive situation for the Jews who, at that time were smarting under the governorship of Pontius Pilate who was echoing the anti-semitic stance being taken in Rome by the Praetorian Prefect Sejanus while the Emperor Tiberius was semi-retired on Capri.<sup>13</sup>

As another example, there is no evidence that Christianity opposed slavery; the contrary can be deduced from the letter of Paul to Philemon. By fulfilling family, social and work obligations with selfless love the Christians sought to serve God

---

<sup>12</sup> Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract* 24-29.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Barnett, *Paul Missionary of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids Michigan/Cambridge U.K.:William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008.) 30-32.

by serving others. The very nature of their faith meant that the consequences of unselfish love influenced behaviour and changed the close world around them of families, friends, their work environment and their community. The Christian understanding of marriage can be seen working-out in this context.

Paul writes about Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila, the way they resiliently left Rome by decree and re-established their family business as tentmakers and leather workers in Egypt and Asia, working together wherever they went. Their working at tent-making and evangelizing with Paul is an exciting contemporary example of a Christian marriage at work, practical and serving the Lord as defined by their time.

The rapid spread of Christianity geographically encompassed a wide spectrum of believers. The new freedoms enjoyed by Christian servants and slaves perhaps helped Christianity gain credibility and attract followers amongst the poor and disenfranchised in the Empire. But what of the social elite? The return to the noble virtues of a simple life attracted some of the noble families of Rome. Fouard mentions patrician families who resisted the pressures of the licentious behaviour that permeated the Augustan period and beyond and indicates that they were discriminated against for what was perceived as an anti-establishment attitude, a betrayal of their class.

... noble characters, whom Tacitus has made immortal. – Cremutius, Cordus, Thraseas, Helvidius, Priscus, Musonius Rufus. By persecuting the highest ranks, the Caesars restored to them something of their innate nobility of soul.<sup>14</sup>

Fouard suggests that it is amongst Roman followers of the stoic moralists of the period that Christianity won its early patrician converts. With regard to how this affected marriage, John Witte in *From Sacrament to Contract* gives further insight.

The bible, particularly the New Testament, provided the Christian tradition with a set of core religious teachings that confirmed the core philosophical teachings of the Greeks and Romans but also went beyond them. Early Christians noted the substantial overlaps between the teachings on marriage life and family in the Mosaic Law and the

---

<sup>14</sup> Fouard, *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity*, 314.

classical Roman law and their comparable understandings of engagement and marriage, husband and wife, sex and procreation, parent and child, household and community, property and legacy, death and inheritance, divorce and remarriage.<sup>15</sup>

Witte, like Fouard, mentions Musonius Rufus (b. circa 30 C.E.), but in another context. Musonius Rufus was a Stoic and, rare amongst philosophers of the time, in that he favoured monogamous marriage declaring:

The husband and wife ... should come together for the purpose of making a life in common and of procreating children, and furthermore of regarding all things in common between them, and nothing peculiar or private to one or the other, not even their own bodies ... in marriage there must be above all perfect companionship and mutual love of husband and wife, both in health and in sickness and under all conditions, since it was with desire for this as well as for having children that both entered upon marriage. (He said that sexual intercourse:) ... was justified only when it occurs in marriage and is indulged in for the purpose of begetting children.<sup>16</sup>

Witte quotes Musonius as being almost unique among first century writers in condemning the sexual double standards of the ancient Greco-Roman world of his day that treated a wife's extra-marital sex with anyone as adultery but allowed a husband to consort freely with prostitutes or slaves, "Whoever destroys human marriage destroys the home, the city, and the whole human race."<sup>17</sup>

Witte also quotes the Roman historian and moralist Plutarch (46-120 C.E.) who wrote in his *Advice to the Bride and Groom*:

When two notes are struck together, the melody belongs to the lower note. Similarly, every action performed in a good household is done by agreement of the partners, but displays the leadership and decision of the husband ... just as ropes gain strength from the twisting of the strands, so their communion may be better preserved by their joint effort, through mutual exchanges of goodwill ... Nature joins you together in your bodies, so that she may take part of each, and mixing them together give you a child that belongs to you both, so that neither of you can say what is

---

<sup>15</sup> Witte, *Sacrament*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Witte, *Sacrament*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Witte, *Sacrament*, 21.

his or her own, and what the other's. *Consistently, Plutarch also writes in his biographies:*

No greater pleasures derived from others, nor more continuous services are conferred on others than those found in marriage, nor can the beauty of another friendship be so highly esteemed or so enviable as when a man and wife keep house in perfect harmony.<sup>18</sup>

This nature-based analysis of marriage exists side-by-side with the well-developed Roman law on marriage that defines rights of ownership of property in marriage, that ignores the abandonment of unwanted children to die of exposure, and that necessarily factor-in the reality that not all marriages reflect a natural fit or harmonious progress.<sup>19</sup>

Witte brings to his marriage analysis the experience of an internationally recognized legal authority and historical theologian. His study of the models of marriage and the changes inculcated in Western marriage over the past two thousand years alert us to the forces at work, even in the first century. He writes of four differing but complementary perspectives that are in tension: a spiritual perspective, a social perspective, a contractual perspective and a naturalist perspective. This tension derives from the way authority is determined in a specific culture at a specific time. He asks:

Which perspective of marriage dominates a culture, or at least prevails in an instance of dispute – the religious, the social, the contractual or the natural? Which authority wields pre-eminent, or at least preemptory, power over marriage and family questions – the church, the state, the marital couple, or God and nature operating through one or more of these parties?<sup>20</sup>

This examination of the forces at work in the first century of the current era, has recognized and acknowledged the spread of powerful influences and the uneven

---

<sup>18</sup> Witte, *Sacrament*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Barrett, *NT Background*, gives relevant translations of Papyri extant in Museums and collections includes: *BGU 1052* (H&E 3). *A Contract of Marriage*. 13 BCE; *P. Oxy.744* (H&E 105). *A letter from husband to wife*. 1 BCE; *BGU 1103* (H&E 6). *Deed of Divorce* 13 BCE.

<sup>20</sup> Witte, *Sacrament*, 2.

nature of their application. First of all, it will be seen that all four of the *cultural* perspectives identified by Witte, i.e. spiritual or religious; social cum legal; the contractual; and the natural, are engaged. Also covered are all the centres of *authority* named by him, i.e. the Roman Law centred in governors, procreators and the Emperor himself; the Mosaic Law as interpreted and taught by Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes; the Christian church communities spread around the Mediterranean under the influence of Paul and others; the Roman *authorities* and their clients states such as the Hasmonean-Herodians and their limited-licence rulers over Jewish law administration, the Sadducees; the standing of the marital couples themselves including their class and family dispositions; and lastly the role of God or Nature, dependant on faith or belief.

All these applied in the first century, with the possible exception of a unified Church, as it is by no means certain that recognized, centralised, authority had successfully extended its reach to all the embryonic Christian church communities by the end of the first century.

An early reference to marriage, in a recognisable Christian response to the marriage customs of the time, comes from the letter of Ignatius of Antioch written to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna in 107 C.E. Ignatius, then in captivity and on his way to Martyrdom in Rome, asks the bishop to:

Speak to my sisters, that they love the Lord, and be satisfied with their husbands both in the flesh and spirit. In like manner also, exhort my brethren, in the name of Jesus Christ, that they love their wives, even as the Lord the Church (Ephesians 5:25). If anyone can continue in a state of purity, to the honour of Him who is Lord of the flesh, let him so remain without boasting. If he begins to boast he is undone; and if he reckons himself greater than the bishop, he is ruined. *But it becomes both men and women who marry, to form their union with the approval of the bishop, that their marriage may be according to God, and not after their own lust. Let all things be done to the honour of God* (1 Corinthians 10:31).<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Church Fathers: *The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp*, Chapter 5. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0110.htm>. Emphasis added.

This seems to indicate that marriage was generally perceived in a naturalistic or possibly civic-legalistic way, without specifically Christian church endorsement, until at least the end of the first century.

The expressed desire of Ignatius, that the local bishop should be asked to approve all events and activities of the members of the Christian community, including in this instance marriage, is also expressed in his letter to the Ephesians, Magnesians, and the Thrallians and strongly confirmed in his Epistle to the Smyrnaeans.<sup>22</sup>

In his efforts to restore unity to the Corinthians Ignatius had become aware of the debilitating influence of discord. It would appear that a patriarchal view of how the world works, underscores this emerging view of a universally united church.

---

<sup>22</sup> Church Fathers: *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, Chapters 8 and 9. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0109.htm>.



## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The questions to be addressed in this thesis were first expressed as follows:

Did our Christian forebears recognize any stabilising influence of marriage on the state? Did they consider such a view relevant in the context of their communities? How did the early overriding concern with Parousia inhibit the development of marriage doctrine or belief? Was the avoidance of sexual sin a social determinant? Are sacredness-or-spirituality, or procreation-or-conjugal love, essential elements of marriage?

By using comparative-historical analysis, this enquiry sought to identify major historical shifts in attitude towards the essentials of marriage, looking for the causes and effects of change. As far as possible, within the limited parameters set for this written thesis, the primary written sources consulted have included the canonical scriptures of the New and Old Testaments, classical Roman, Greek and Jewish writers of the period, together with reputable secondary sources and commentators. To objectively determine the influences on marriage at work in the first century, the thesis focuses on the impact of identifiable influences and influencers on marriage, as come within the purview of the early Christians. The thesis has taken into account the motivations behind the writings examined and been actively concerned that they be understood within the cultural frameworks of the time.

The thesis examines how and why marriage evolved in the Jewish tradition; the pronouncements on marriage by Christ, a practicing and devout Jew; and the subsequent writings of the Jewish authors of the Christian gospels and epistles and their contemporaries and first-century successors in the emerging Christian church communities. The main modern sources consulted for the analysis of early Christian marriage, the Christian vision of family, and consequent role of women, range from Fouard who wrote *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity* in the 1890s to such contemporaries as Ruden (*Paul Amongst the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time.*), Loader (*Did Adultery Mandate Divorce? A Reassessment of Jesus' Divorce Logia*) and T. J. Wray (*Good Girls, Bad Girls of the New Testament the Enduring Lessons*) whose aforementioned works were published as late as 2010, 2015 and 2016 respectively.

The writings of the Church Fathers who have commented on early developments in the Church are quoted and the thesis draws on the perceptive analyses of specialists John Witte regarding Roman and Jewish Law in *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition*, and Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: from Galilee to Gregory the Great*.

In so doing the essential components in marriage identified and noted as common to both natural and religiously attuned marriage are: concern for honour, including both personal honour and family honour, mutual commitment, openness to the procreation of children, the expectation of property exchange, more latterly the mutual enjoyment of sexual union, and for most of history, the leading role and responsibility for family resting with the male partner. Both Jewish and Christian marriage partners revered God as a third partner in the marriage covenant.

With the exception of this last religious value, the secular values recognized above were seen to be idealised in the writings of the Greek and Roman philosophers, and in the changing understanding of Jewish marriage values by the ruling class. The Christian perspective specifically gave equal conjugal rights to husband and wife, albeit with the male exercising a leadership, if not senior, role in the partnership. The Jewish concern for procreation and the continuance of the race, consonant with honour and ritual purity, was to them more important than the pleasure of sexual union within the marriage, though the importance of happiness in a sound marriage was well recognized. By contrast, in the hedonistic Romano-Hellenistic culture in the first century, pleasure became more favoured than commitment to procreation, and serial monogamy became a norm for most of the privileged classes.

As noted in Chapter 4 it was for this reason that Caesar Augustus had to legislate additional benefits for those heirs who themselves had children. Four decades earlier it was impossible to get that legislation passed in the Senate. In Palestine, early in the century, the nominally Jewish kings and tetrarchs in positions of power used that power irresponsibly to preserve or increase family inheritance and perceived honour, and so indulged pleasure by breaking conventional Jewish marriage laws in respect to incest and even murder. The Christians, towards the end of the century, influenced by expectations of the Parousia, were prepared to

put consideration of marriage *after* concern with preparation for the life-to-come. For a time, celibacy was lauded as preferable to marriage for what were considered practical rather than religious reasons; but marriage was celebrated as an ideal state, mirrored in the relationship between Christ and his church. There were prime examples of active marriage partnerships where Christian women had leadership roles in the community and in the household, if not the marriage.

The spiritual concomitant of marriage – the covenant between the partners, and with God underwriting commitment, is borne out in cultural attitudes to divorce firstly in Jewish based belief and subsequently in the emerging Christian culture. The religious or spiritual element in Romano-Hellenic marriage derived from the emphasis on the need to have a good relationship with the ‘household gods’, and the blessings of greater gods such as Venus, if the family was to prosper in a harmonious environment. Divorce was relatively easy but frowned on in the ‘best’ circles.

Christian marriages, founded on a spiritual basis that embraced covenant and religious awe, added a new freedom to commit, with reverence and human love to each other, to family and beyond, to embrace the community. The consequent *agape* was a living and continuing feast that gave vibrancy to the church and separated Christians from other Roman citizens. Jesus’ commandment of love permeated the Christian community, (John 15: 12-17).

The importance of marriage, for the continuation of the race, that inspired Judaism, also had its parallel in the Grecian and Roman concern for marriage as a microcosm of the *state*, and essential for the healthy continuance of society. By the end of the century we find Ignatius of Antioch endeavouring to bring marriage under the jurisdiction of the Church as part of the centralizing role he saw the Church as having, to keep the Christians united under God.

From this it is possible to draw the conclusion that Christianity as a leaven in society was a force for good. It paralleled and re-enforced the best in nature and human nature by nurturing stable and respectful relationships. As the overriding view was that marriage was essential for a stable state, it might be concluded that

Christian marriage was valuable, not only as a good for those making the commitment, but by extension was good for the health of the state.

This research begins where marriage, at the beginning of the century is a force limited in its extent in the wider community; is flouted and abused by many in authority; and yet it is seen by the highest authority of the time, the Roman Emperor, as essential for the continuance of the state, and in urgent need of being re-constituted. The discussion finishes at the point where Christianity has become a new force in pushing a new paradigm of freedom-based marriage-for-all; it embraces a covenant not only to each partner, but to God who is central to the lives-and-very-existence of all; and it extends a loving commitment, not only to the partners, but to family and community.

The cultural diversity relating to marriage and its mystical overtones, and the Roman policy of allowing indigenous religious practices to continue after conquest (alongside state-sponsored worship), created a climate where Christian marriage and the Christian outlook on marriage became part of the changing first century landscape. Christian freedom, based on mutual respect and self-less love, might prove attractive to those places where church communities were established; they were a witness for positive change to those wider communities. It seems fair to conclude that Christian marriage, as an extension or modification of both civil and Jewish marriage, even in its first century embryonic existence, exerted an influence, beneficial to the State.

**Research: returning to the specific research questions**

*Did our Christian forebears recognize any stabilising influence of marriage on the state?*

There appears to be no formal consideration of the link by Christians per se, but this research recognizes such a connection, as demonstrated.

*Did they consider such a view relevant in the context of their communities?*

Marriage was perceived by Christians as necessary for the well-being of their community in that it helped preserve the sexual integrity of individuals waiting for the Parousia; and in the latter years of the century, the Church sought to bless Christian marriage as an enterprise dedicated to God. The Jewish understanding of a covenant with God was maintained by the early Christians.

*How did the early overriding concern with Parousia inhibit the development of marriage doctrine or belief?*

In the light of the research this question anticipates that such a situation did obtain, yet history shows that as time elapsed and Christians sought normality, marriage remained part of the normal human condition, albeit a marriage re-interpreted in the light of the Christian faith.

*Was the avoidance of sexual sin a social determinant?*

The avoidance of sexual sin played a part in the early Christian view of marriage. In the wider community, the perceived nexus between sexual excesses and the rather shaky future of the State became a social determinant that benefited Christianity, and enabled Christianity to have a beneficial effect on the state.

*Are sacredness-or-spirituality, or procreation-or-conjugal love, essential elements of marriage?*

The married state pre-dates in origin any recorded understanding of sacredness or spirituality, so it could not be said that they constituted an essential element of marriage. However, the Jewish evolution of faith in a personal single God who covenanted with his people did influence how marriage was perceived first by the Jews as a sacred way to continue the existence of a legitimate, covenanted people; following this, with the advent of Christianity, this spiritual recognition of God's role in marriage became more personal and more closely related to the conjugal love of the married couple and the rearing of their family.

### **Cross-cultural social and religious impact**

As indicated in Chapter 1 of this study, the inquiry has considered the importance placed by society on such elements in marriage as 1) commitment, 2) property rights, 3) conjugal rights, 4) family expectations and honour, 5) inheritance, and 6) fidelity within society generally and within the early Church community. The research shows that Christianity provided a new way of looking at them in the light of the Christian call to a self-less love, that puts the needs of others first. In this way society impacted on Christianity and Christianity impacted on the wider society.

The final question put at the beginning of the thesis highlights the religious impact of Christianity on marriage. Did the monotheistic beliefs of Jews and Christians with their sense of divine covenant affect the dimensions of sacredness in the marriage vow, by encouraging fidelity and commitment to a covenant with God and with each other? The evidence shows that the answer is yes. Paul's successful preaching the existence of the God unknown (Acts 17:23) to the Gentiles had a significant effect on his hearers and his close followers as Christianity rapidly spread.

This discussion has shown the important contribution to the universal secular concept of marriage of such widespread factors as legitimacy, property-inheritance, politically motivated racial and/ or religious integrity, ritual purity, and sexual taboos. The categories are important in understanding marriage in any era; but the early development of Christian understanding of marriage brought to a new level in the western world an understanding of equality in partnership, the importance of reciprocal conjugal rights, a heightened recognition of the status and role of women in marriage, albeit under the leadership of men, and responsibility for the procreation and rearing of children.

## REFERENCES

Albright, William Foxwell. *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel: The Ayer Lectures of the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School 1941*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 1956.

Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952.

Barnett, Paul. *Missionary of Jesus*. Cambridge U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.

Barrett, C.K. *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins*. San Francisco: Revised Edition, Harper Collins 1959.

Baumert, Lisa. "Biblical Interpretation and the Epistle to the Ephesians." *Priscilla Papers* 25, no.2 (Spring 2011): 22-25.

BGU 1052 (H&E 3). *A Contract of Marriage*. 13 BCE; *P. Oxy.744* (H&E 105). *A letter from husband to wife*. 1 BCE; *BGU 1103* (H&E 6). *Deed of Divorce* 13 BCE.

Cerfaux, Lucien. *The Christian in the Theology of Saint Paul*. New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1967.

Clinton, Tim. The State of Christian Marriage. *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 3 (2003): 179-187.

Chadwick, Henry. *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.

Cohick, Lynn. *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009. Accessed June 4, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. UNDA 2018-06-04 00:07:43

Conzelmann, Hans. *History of Primitive Christianity*. Translated by John E. Steely. London, UK: Abingdon Press, 1993.

Cooper, Kate and Julia Willner, eds *Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300-900*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, Translated by Earnest Cary. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Donfried, Karl Paul. *Paul, Jesus and Judaism*, Cambridge, UK: T&T Clark, 2002.

Ellenson, David N. *Jewish Meaning in a World of Choice: Studies in Tradition and Modernity*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2014.

———. *Wissenschaft Des Judentums, Historical Consciousness and Jewish Faith: The Diverse Paths of Frankel, Auerbach and Halevy*. New York, NY: Leo Baeck, 2004.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schussler *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. N.Y.: Crossroad 1983.

———. Society of Biblical Literature. *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014. Accessed May 27, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. UNDA 2018-05-27 00:05:48.

Fouard, Constant. *Saint Peter and the First Years of Christianity*, edited by Griffith, George F. X. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1892.

Freyne, Sean. *New Testament Message: A Biblical Theological Commentary*. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980.

Gilby, Thomas. *Thomas Aquinas: Philosophical Texts*. London: Oxford University Press, 1951.



Giordani, Igino. *The Social Message of Jesus*. Translated by Zizzamia, Alba I. Reprint ed. Paterson NJ: St Anthony Guild Press, 1977.

Hanson, K.C. and Oakman, Douglas. E. *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998.

Ignatius of Antioch. *Epistle to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna*.  
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0110.htm>

Ignatius of Antioch. *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*.  
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0109.htm>.

Josephus, Flavius. *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, edited by Maier, Paul L. Translated by Whiston, William. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Kierkegaard Anthology* edited by R. W. Bretall. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947.

Loader, William R. G. "Did Adultery Mandate Divorce? A Reassessment of Jesus' Divorce Logia." *New Testament Studies* 61, no. 1 (2015): 67-78.

Loader, William. *The New Testament with Imagination: A fresh Approach to Its Writings and Themes*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007.

Loader, William. *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013.

Mahoney, J. and D. Rueschemeyer. *Comparative Historical Analysis: Achievements and Agendas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Malina, Bruce J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Rev. ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

Matthews, V.W. and J. C. Moyer. *The Old Testament: Text and Context*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.

Meier, John P. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. New York, NY: Doubleday 2001.

Morhlang, Roger. *Paul and His Life-Transforming Theology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013.

Moxnes, Halvor, ed. *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*. London: Routledge, 1997. Accessed May 29, 2028. ProQuest Ebook Central. UNDA 2018-05-29 05:51:00

Myers, D. N. *Resisting History: Historicism and its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Niebuhr, Richard H. *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. New York, NY: Harper Row, 1963.

Nunnally-Cox, Janice. *Foremothers: Women of the Bible*. New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1981. Olsen, Glen, ed. *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*. New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing. 2013.

Philo. *Philo*. Translated by Yonge, C. D., edited by Scholer, David M. United States: Hendrickson, 2016.

Riches, John K. "The Social World of Jesus." *Interpretation* 50 no. 4 (1996): 383-393.

Robinson, John A.P. *Redating the New Testament*, London, U.K.: SCM Press, 1978.

Ruden, Sarah. *Paul among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2010.

Schüngel-Straumann, Helen. “Androcentric to Christian Feminist Exegesis: Genesis 1-3,” In *Feminist Biblical Studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Scholarship and Movement*, edited by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 123-144. Atlanta: GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2014.

Sessa, Kristina. Domestic Conversions: “Households and Bishops in the Late Antique ‘Papal Legends’”. In *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300-900*, eds. Cooper, Kate and Julia Hillner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Stambaugh, John E and Balch, David L. “The New Testament in its Social Environment”, *Library of Early Christianity*, edited by Meeks, Wayne A. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1986.

Thrall, Margaret E. *Commentary: The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1965.

Winton, Thomas, D. *Documents from Old Testament Times*, New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1961.

Vermes, Geza, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. Revised Edition, Penguin Books 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition St Ives U.K.: Clays Ltd, 2011.

Vermes, Geza, *Jesus in his Jewish Context*, London, U.K.: SCM-Canterbury Press, 2003.

Witte, John. *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012.

Wray, T. J. *Good Girls, Bad Girls of the New Testament: Their Enduring Lessons*. London. UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Washington, WA: University of Washington Press, 1982.

Ziesler, John. *Pauline Christianity*. Oxford Bible Series., edited by Ackroyd, P. R. and Stanton, G.N. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990.