

## THE APOSTLE PAUL AND THE GRECO-ROMAN CULTS OF WOMEN

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Few issues create such bitter contention in contemporary Christendom as that of the interpretation of the Pauline mandates on women. The Pauline epistles tell of Phoebe, a deacon and church official (Rom 16:1-2); of Junia, an apostle (16:7); of Euodias and Syntyche, co-workers of the apostle Paul (Phil 4:2-3). The church at Philippi was developed from a nucleus of women (Acts 16:12-15, 40), while other women gave direction to churches that met in their homes (12:12; Col 4:15; 1 Cor 1:11; 16:19; Rom 16:2-5; 2 John). Priscilla, Paul's missionary traveling companion, gave instruction to the learned Apollos (Acts 18:26) at Ephesus, the very city to which is addressed the famous directive: "I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over a man" (1 Tim 2:12). The women of Corinth had silence enjoined upon them (1 Cor 14:34-35) only three chapters after having been granted permission to pray and prophesy, properly attired, in the Christian assembly (11:5-6).

Denominations and individual congregations split over the issue, and many gifted women turn their backs on the Church altogether. I should like to consider the same subject that has already occasioned so much debate, but I should like to do so as a classicist. As such I shall address myself to a reconstruction of the ancient Greco-Roman world, particularly the socio-religious world of women. It is not an easy task, for history is written by, for and about men. Nevertheless there are many bits of evidence here and there that can be put together from many different sources.

To present even a brief overview I must strip the Victorian patina from the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome. Some of the evidence I shall present is not pleasant and certainly not pretty. Yet I believe that the Pauline restrictions must be seen against this background. To soft-pedal, to be vague rather than explicit, is to be less than truthful. The Scriptures say, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." It is with the hope of in some small measure offering women freedom within the context of Scripture that I present this material.

### I. PAUL'S ENCOUNTERS WITH THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

The journeys of the apostle Paul along the great travel-routes of the eastern Mediterranean world brought him into contact with many varieties of Gentile belief and practice. Far from avoiding such interaction and restricting his efforts to Jews or Jewish sympathizers, the missionary to the Gentiles repeatedly

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faced the religious realities of Greco-Roman paganism.

According to the account in Acts, the consequences were often disastrous. There was the riot of the silversmiths devoted to the cult of Artemis of Ephesus (19:23–40). There was the attempt of the high priest of Jupiter to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas, whom he considered manifestations of Hermes and Zeus (14:8–20). The apostle's inability to communicate his protests in the Lycaonian tongue further complicated the matter. The upshot was that the enraged mob left Paul for dead outside the city walls of Lystra. These were not his only disasters. In one of his unfortunate encounters he aroused strong feminine hostility.

He alienated the sedate God-fearing women of Antioch in Pisidia when the Gentiles jammed the synagogue to hear his message (13:45). The congregation that had welcomed him warmly at first was now incensed. The Greek word used of the new element whom Paul introduced to the peaceful house of worship is *ochlos*, "crowd" or "mob." But the same word also is used to describe the kinds of disruptive behavior that a crowd may produce. Paul himself, when charged with bringing Gentiles into the temple at Jerusalem, denied the allegation and maintained that he had created no *ochlos* (24:12, 18).

The same could probably not be said of Paul's Antiochene adherents. It should be pointed out that Pisidian Antioch lay in the very heart of Anatolia, where religious expression—particularly that of women—took on an extremely noisy, wild and orgiastic aspect. The God-fearing women of the synagogue were themselves Gentiles who had become accustomed to the Jewish form of worship. The word used to describe them is *euschēmones*, which may imply that they were of a high social position or alternatively that they were respectable or well behaved. At any rate these respectable and influential feminine God-fearers found either the presence of pagans in the synagogue or their cult practices so offensive that they took the lead in driving Paul out of town (13:14–51).

The story indicates the power of the women of Antioch in both synagogue and community, a phenomenon also emphasized in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. But why had they taken offense in the first place? The synagogue congregation already contained Jews, proselytes and God-fearers, so that the mere presence of Gentiles cannot account for the indignation that was generated. The most obvious explanation is that these decorous, God-fearing women would not tolerate the behavior of the other women, heathen uninstructed in sedate Jewish forms of worship. Ladies concerned with observing all the proprieties are usually the most swift in condemning those of their own sex who do not measure up to certain standards of dress or comportment.

## II. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Not long afterwards Paul was summoned to the Jerusalem Council to deliberate how to meld Jew and Gentile into one new body in Christ (Acts 15). The conclusion was that the Gentiles should not be obligated to keep the whole law but should refrain from those activities that were traditionally most offensive to Jews: idolatry and sexual impropriety. The story tells of a great deal of thought, prayer and soul-searching being invested in seeking a resolution for this thorny problem.

Thereafter, as Acts continues to record his progress, Paul became enormously successful with the very type of women who had previously rejected him. Respectable, God-fearing women such as those of Philippi, Berea and Thessalonica, as well as Lydia, Priscilla, Bernice and Drusilla, now received his message.<sup>1</sup> I believe he came to terms with the objectionable features of feminine religious practice and instead taught new behavior that would make Gentile women acceptable in the Church of Jesus Christ to all those who worshiped in a Jewish mode.

### III. OUR FAULTY UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN

It is at this point that we are least capable of understanding the rationale of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Of the highly intellectual philosophic systems of antiquity we know a considerable amount, for their adherents were literate and highly articulate. Their written works have been preserved and are still the object of much conscientious scholarship. We are best equipped to understand Paul's Mars' Hill address to the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17) and his discussion of wisdom in 1 Corinthians 1-2. Yet there were other cults that the apostle encountered with far greater frequency than the rarefied ones of the intelligentsia. Of these religions of everyday people we know considerably less. Here we have greater difficulty in identifying the Pauline responses, such as his use of the terminology from the mystery religions<sup>2</sup> and his inquiry to the Galatians as to who has put the evil eye on them (Gal 3:1).

Of the religions of women we know least of all, and only in the last ten years or so have they become the subject of scholarly inquiry. Yet the realms of male and female religion frequently represented diverse and disparate worlds, often separated by suspicion and hostility. Plato, for instance, wrote that when appointing sacrifices and rituals for the model state "they shall have festivals for women, distinguishing those which ought to be separated from men's festivals and those which ought not."<sup>3</sup> Frequently women worshiped different deities from the men, in different temples and on different days. Feminine religiosity was quite different from its masculine counterpart.

Yet Paul viewed the Church as a body containing Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female (Gal 3:28). This required serious readjustment whether one was formerly an observant Jew, a philosophical Greek, or a member of a disadvantaged class of society. Conversion to a new deity did not necessarily alter one's former attitudes and practices. If Christians became remarkable for the way in which they loved one another, it is obvious that they received some very practical exhortations from Paul to respect the religious sensibilities of others, to consider the weaker sister and brother who had been assumed into the body. The assimilation of formerly pagan women would pose

<sup>1</sup>Acts 16:1, 13-15; 17:4, 12; 18:2-3, 18; 24:24; 25:13; 26:30.

<sup>2</sup>Such as Col 2:18.

<sup>3</sup>Plato, *Laws* 8.828.

special difficulties. It is noteworthy that the Pauline dictates regarding women are directed to troubled Gentile churches with serious problems involving undesirable religious elements. These dictates should be studied in the context of the phenomena associated with the cults and practices of ancient women.

#### IV. MALE CONDEMNATION OF FEMININE PIETY

The types of testimonia that women did leave behind to their own piety, such as votive offerings and temple inscriptions—even the coins of a religiously-minded mint mistress—have often been disregarded, while the records made by men have been made normative. Those literate males whose discussions of philosophy and religion have been preserved tended to view women's piety with scorn and censure.

Ancient women, as disadvantaged, neglected and repressed members of society, often turned to religion as a release and escape. In it they vented violent emotions that were not able to be expressed through any other channel. Greek women in particular were kept as virtual prisoners in their own homes, cut off from normal human contacts. It is not surprising that they should make the most of religious festivals for which they might leave the house and that their worship should develop anti-social tendencies. Neither is it surprising that women who lacked any sort of formal education flocked to cults that were despised by the intellectuals.

It must be acknowledged that there were many aspects of ancient feminine religiosity that stood in direct opposition to restrained and rational forms of worship. Plutarch, putting the worst interpretation on what he knew of female cult, wrote that no god would look with approval on the secret and stealthy rites performed by a woman.<sup>4</sup>

Significant attitudes are reflected in Greek tragedy. Although the great dramas were written several centuries before the NT era, they nevertheless continued to exert a tremendous influence on the thought of Paul's day. Aeschylus describes a city under siege, its terrified women wishing to invoke divine aid. They have left their houses and come to pray at the shrines of the gods. The king protests:

You insupportable creatures, I ask,  
is this the best, is this for the city's safety . . .  
to have you falling at the images  
of the city's gods crying and howling,  
an object of hatred for all temperate souls?

What is outside is a man's province; let no  
woman debate it: within doors do no mischief!

But it is man's part, the sacrifice, the consultation  
of the gods, when the enemy assault us;  
it is yours to be silent and stay within doors.<sup>5</sup>

Even in so dire an extremity the religious activities of women are an object

<sup>4</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 140 D.

<sup>5</sup>Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1956), lines 180 ff.

of contempt, hatred and rejection. This statement is strong but far from unique in the attitude it expresses. Serious religion, especially as it pertained to the state, was a male province. The consultation of oracles and offering of sacrifices were the prerogatives of men, and the less interference from women the better. Female religion, thus blocked, often turned to other avenues of expression.

## V. THE CEREMONIAL CRIES OF WOMEN

King Eteocles took drastic exception to the cries the women were raising as they prayed. The noise that frequently attended women's participation was in marked contrast to the silence required of men. From the *Iliad* onward, we read of the sacred cries of women. Their voices raised the *olylygia* at the moment when the sacrificial animal fell in formal rites.

In Aeschylus' play, Eteocles finally agrees to allow the women a religious observance. He shall offer a proper prayer, and then the women may engage in the only rite he considers appropriate for them: the raising of the *olylygia*. This, he says, is the Grecian custom and will bring joy to their allies and dread to their foes.<sup>6</sup> Alkaios too describes the wondrous sound of women's sacred cries at yearly festivals.<sup>7</sup>

In ecstatic cults, such as those of Cybele and Dionysos, the *olylygia* was an essential ingredient of the clamor or religious hubbub of the rites.<sup>8</sup> Two of the names for Dionysos arose from the cries emitted by his followers: Evios from *evoi*, and Iacchos from *iacho*. "He is called lord of the loud cry, mad exciter of women."<sup>9</sup> If we may trust Aristophanes, women were not above using these sacred shouts to drown out what the men were saying, even in solemn assemblies.<sup>10</sup>

At the beginning of the first century Strabo protested that everyone agreed in regarding women as the prime movers in religion. It was the women who provoked the men to the more attentive worship of the gods, to festivals, and to wild outcries.<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, writing in the early second century of the Christian era, said that even the female worshipers of Osiris engaged in shoutings and movements similar to those of women in the sway of Dionysiac frenzy.<sup>12</sup>

A plaque excavated from the sanctuary of Demeter at Corinth<sup>13</sup> is dedicated

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., lines 269–270.

<sup>7</sup>Alkaios, *Frag.* 130.32.

<sup>8</sup>Strabo, *Geography* 10.3.7; L. Deubner, "Olylyge und Verwandtes," *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1941) 1. 23–26; Dittenberger, *Syll.* 3, 982, l. 25 n.19. Paul mentions other elements of clamor too: sounding brass, tinkling cymbal, trumpet, flute.

<sup>9</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 671 C.

<sup>10</sup>Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 387–398.

<sup>11</sup>Strabo 7.3.3 (63 B.C.–A.D. 21).

<sup>12</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 364 F.

<sup>13</sup>R. Stroud, "The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore on Acrocorinth," *Hesperia* 37 (1968) 299–317.

to the sacred cries of women and reads "*olylyngos*," evidence that the phenomenon was alive and well at Corinth. The piece cannot be dated with any exactitude, but the literary evidence for the sacred ululations of women continues well into the Christian era. The ritual cries of women are still an integral part of many cultures and persist in certain rural areas of Greece even today.

This may explain Paul's request in 1 Cor 14:34-35 for silence on the part of women during ecstatic services that involved madness, glossolalia, and prophecy—all three known to have been part of the Dionysiac religion, which appealed so enormously to women.<sup>14</sup> In a passage that calls for no noise without meaning (14:9, 11-13, 28) and even meaningful utterance to be restricted to one at a time (vv 29-31), an injunction against the tumultuous cries of women is appropriate.

## VI. FEMININE REACTION TO MALE ANIMOSITY

Although the cultic activities of women were far better accepted in the Roman era than they had been in the classical Greek age, still there were efforts to curb their free practice of religion. Furthermore, certain religions popular with women were considered politically dangerous. The cult of Isis, which made women the equal of men, was driven out of Rome no less than three times.<sup>15</sup> Both Greek and Roman society had tried to regulate and restrain female piety by brute force as well as by legislative measures.<sup>16</sup> The Roman senate took stern action against the cult of Dionysos, largely because the adherents were principally women,<sup>17</sup> and Cicero forbade women performing sacrifices at night.<sup>18</sup> It may well be a law such as this that is referred to in 1 Cor 14:35 requiring women to be in control of themselves.

If women turned to other forms of religious expression, it was often a direct reaction to male animosity. A heroine of Euripides protests:

Vain is men's blame of women,  
 It twangs the empty bow and speaks evilly.  
 But they are superior to men, and this I will show you.  
 Their covenants do not need witnesses for attestation. [break in text]  
 They hold sway over their houses and preserve within  
 Their homes the goods conveyed by ship.  
 The house in want of a woman is not tidy nor blessed.  
 Moreover in matters pertaining to the gods—  
     I judge them foremost.  
 There we have the greatest share. For women prophesy  
 In the oracles of Phoebus, the mind of Loxias [Apollo].  
 And likewise at the holy pedestal of Dodona

<sup>14</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 432 E; Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.5.

<sup>15</sup>S. K. Heyob, *The Cult of Isis Among Women in the Graeco-Roman World* (Leyden, 1975) 18 ff.

<sup>16</sup>Stobaeus 4.23.61; Plutarch, *Life of Solon*; Cicero, *Laws* 2.15.

<sup>17</sup>Livy 38.15-18.

<sup>18</sup>Cicero, *Laws* 2.7.19-27.

by the sacred oak the female sex provides the counsels  
of Zeus to all in Greece who wish it.

Whatever holy rites are performed unto the Fates  
or Nameless Goddesses [i.e., the Furies]—

These holy offices are not appointed to men

But entirely among women are they promoted to honour.

Such is rightly the feminine role in matters pertaining to the gods.<sup>19</sup>

This little-known fragment from Euripides' *Melanippē* gives a surprising view of Greek religion as it related to sex roles. It is important to bear in mind that it was written by a male dramatist and that it cannot necessarily be taken as indicative of what women truly felt. Yet Euripides showed at times a remarkable sympathy toward women. The main importance of this text lies in its perception of the religious power of women. It states quite clearly that certain religious functions are available only to women and that gender, in this case femininity, is a qualifying factor. Significantly the expression has its origin in a protest against male hostility. These texts from tragedy reveal not only the sex hostility that was basic in certain cults but also the efforts of one sex to gain a monopoly on the gods at the expense of the other sex.

## VII. THE RELIGIOUS POWER OF WOMEN

Euripides' statement that in religion women have the chiefest part is worth pondering. They assumed roles as the prime movers in religion, those who played an initiatory and introductory role. Young maidens were said to have brought Demeter into the city of Eleusis, and women are credited with having introduced the cult of Dionysos into both Italy and Greece.<sup>20</sup> The mother of Aeschines was responsible for the entry of the Sabazios cult into Athens, while Roman matrons played a major role in gaining a place for Cybele in the Roman pantheon.<sup>21</sup> The religious influence of women in Asia Minor was enormous.

If women were not usually allowed to consult oracles, yet only they might deliver them at the famed shrines in Dodona and Delphi. The quotation from Euripides suggests that women saw this as a sign of their superiority. They alone might serve as mediators in bringing the will of Zeus and Apollo to males. The mediatorial role of women was important throughout the history of Greek religion.<sup>22</sup> In artistic representations they figure as the mystagogues who initiate males into the divine mysteries. Plato, Plutarch and others spoke of a feminine spiritual principle.

<sup>19</sup>*Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta Papyracea Nuper Reperta* (ed. A. S. Hunt; Oxford, 1912), 6, *Euripidou Melanippē*, lines 1–22. Nauck, *Frag.* 499, contains the first three lines.

<sup>20</sup>*Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 160–190.

<sup>21</sup>Demosthenes, *De Cor.* 313; Strabo 10.3.471.

<sup>22</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 372; Athenaeus 13.32. "Honor be to the woman on earth as in Heaven, and may she be sanctified, and help us to mount to the Great Soul of the world who gives birth, preserves, and renews—the divine Goddess who bears along all souls in the mantle of light." Pythagorean prayer quoted in slightly different form by E. Schuré, *The Great Initiates* (West Nyack: St. George, 1961) 316.

It gave women a sort of religious one-up-manship that carried into gnosticism, where a female figure was often the messenger of divine revelation. The writer of the pastorals may have had this in mind when he stated that Paul had been sent to the Gentiles as herald and teacher of the truth that there is one God and one mediator (1 Tim 2:4-7). Immediately after this statement he gives separate directives for the behavior of Gentile men and women (2:8-11). Although time forbids a discussion of 2:12, there is a certain amount of evidence in the context that this prohibition is directed against women who claimed a feminine spirituality and power of creation superior to that of males.<sup>23</sup>

### VIII. SEGREGATION

The Christian gospel called for an end to the segregation that so often disbarred one sex or the other from full religious participation (1 Cor 11:11-12). The cults of Mithras, Hercules and Orpheus were not ordinarily open to women. Conversely, you may recall that Julius Caesar divorced his wife when she permitted a man to enter the house during the rites of the Bona Dea.<sup>24</sup> Even within the same cult a given precinct or festival might admit only one sex.

This exclusivity was defended fiercely. A story is told of King Battos who insisted on attending the all-female rite of the Thesmophoria. The women, powerless to eject the king, allowed him to view the initial ceremony, which was open to all. Then they seized the sacrificial knives and removed from the king's body the organ that distinguished him as male. Their mission accomplished, they proceeded with the ceremony.<sup>25</sup>

Euripides' *Bacchae* tells of the dismemberment of Pentheus who, dressed as a woman, undertook to spy upon an all-female celebration of the rites of Dionysos. Two statues of the god stood in the market place at Corinth and were said to be carved from the very tree whence the women had pulled this peeping Tom to his death.<sup>26</sup>

### IX. HOSTILITY

There was another problem that was far more basic and pervasive: that of religiously inspired hostility between the sexes. Unquestionably women at times used their religion as a means of protest and sex hostility. There is even some evidence that women availed themselves of a festival in honor of the god Adonis to break off the male organs on cult pillars all over Athens in protest

<sup>23</sup>C. Kroeger, "1 Timothy 2:12—A Classicist's View," in *Women, Authority and the Bible* (ed. A. Mickelsen; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 225-244.

<sup>24</sup>See W. S. Anderson, "Hercules Exclusus: Propertius IV,9," *AJP* 85/1 (1964) 1-12.

<sup>25</sup>Aelian, *Frag.* 44. See also M. Detienne, "Violentes 'Eugénies' en pléines Thesmophories: des femmes couvertes de sang," in M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant, *La Cuisine de Sacrifice en Pays Grec* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) 183-214.

<sup>26</sup>Pausanias 2.2.



at the launching of an ill-advised military expedition against Syracuse in 415 B.C.<sup>27</sup>

Abundant literary and artistic evidence reveals such sex hostility especially in Dionysiac religion.<sup>28</sup> Dionysiac vase paintings dating from the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. reveal sexual harassment on the part of men and direct attacks by women upon masculinity. Such pictures are highly useful in reconstructing ancient social history. Unfortunately by the NT era tastes had changed, and vases no longer bore such scenes. It is still permissible to use such data, however, if we are able to find other forms of attestation for the continuance of such attitudes or actions. These vase paintings represent an extreme expression, yet the attitudes continued—though in a somewhat mitigated form—into the common era. Sometimes women deliberately used cult activities to repel men. Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great,

was more zealous than all the rest and carried out these rites of possession and ecstasy in a very barbarous fashion and introduced huge tame serpents into the Bacchic assemblies, and these kept creeping out of the ivy and the mystic *likna* and twining themselves round the wands of the women and their garlands, and frightening the men out of their senses.<sup>29</sup>

## X. MAENADISM

Female worshipers of Dionysos were known as *maenads*, meaning “mad ones.”<sup>30</sup> It is significant that the term did not apply to men and that it was usually women who were smitten by the god’s *mania*. The maenads boasted of this altered state of consciousness as a gift from Dionysos, who was the god of wine and madness. These women, who seldom saw the world that lay outside their own front door, hailed him as their liberator, *Lusios*. Biennially his god-given *mania* “set them free from shuttle and from loom”<sup>31</sup> and drove them to the mountains to dance and rave and celebrate his revels, free from all restraint. Young animals were torn apart limb from limb and devoured while still raw, warm and quivering, in a ritual action known as *sparagmos*. Grisly tales were told of instances in which the victims had been human.<sup>32</sup>

Women in the NT era, though in a somewhat more restrained fashion, still

<sup>27</sup>E. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus* (New York, 1985) 385–395.

<sup>28</sup>R. Kraemer, “Ecstasy and Possession: The Attraction of Women to the Cult of Dionysus,” *HTR* 72 (1979) 55–80; S. McNally, “The Maenad in Early Greek Art,” in *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers* (ed. J. Peradotto and J.P. Sullivan; Albany, 1984) 107–142.

<sup>29</sup>Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 2.

<sup>30</sup>A. Henrichs, “Greek Maenadism from Olympias to Messalina,” *Harvard Studies in Philology* 82 (1978) 121–160; E. R. Dodds, “Introduction,” Euripides’ *Bacchae* (2d ed.; Oxford, 1974) xi–xxv; “Maenadism in the Bacchae,” *HTR* 32 (1940) 155 ff.

<sup>31</sup>Euripides, *Bacchae*, line 118.

<sup>32</sup>The most complete description of this is in Euripides’ *Bacchae*.

knew the god's frenzy and rejoiced in his liberating *mania*.<sup>33</sup> Pausanias, about A.D. 150, wrote of "women who go mad in honor of Dionysos"<sup>34</sup> and celebrate "mad revels" on Mount Parnassus. Plutarch, in approximately A.D. 100, described the work of a rescue party who brought down from Parnassus a group of maenads caught in a fierce winter storm.<sup>35</sup>

The same religious madness or *mania* that controlled the maenads was said to be present in the Corinthian congregation, many of whom had recently been under the sway of the pagan gods (1 Cor 12:1-2). An uninformed person who walked into their ecstatic service would certainly look upon the excesses as religiously inspired madness (14:23). It is within this context that we should seek to understand Paul's directives to Corinth.

## XI. PAGAN ELEMENTS IN THE CORINTHIAN CONGREGATION

First Corinthians is remarkable for the insights it furnishes as to the cult practices of former pagans in the congregation. While the book of Acts reveals how quickly certain religious practitioners attempted to incorporate the name and power of Jesus into already existent non-Christian rituals,<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians speaks of converts who tended to add elements of their previous religious experience to their newly-adopted worship. Since most of these new believers were of a low social order (1 Cor 1:26), the vestiges of their former beliefs and practice betray an identification with the less exalted aspects of Greek religion. For the most part they are associated with the mystery cults, especially that of Dionysos. Those who objected to a bodily resurrection, for instance, may have based their opposition upon the mystery belief that the soul was imprisoned into the body as a punishment for past crimes and that after death the return of the soul to the body represented further punishment.<sup>37</sup>

Many of the pagan features present in the Corinthian congregation were objectionable by Christian standards. There was ritual drunkenness, for example, at the Corinthian eucharist (1 Cor 11:21). Although drunkenness in honor of Jesus was not to be tolerated, intoxication befitted the cult of Dionysos, the god of wine, very well.<sup>38</sup> Indeed Plato complained of the cults that defined the bliss of the afterlife in terms of perpetual intoxication.<sup>39</sup>

If those who could afford it gorged themselves at the eucharist (11:21), there

<sup>33</sup>Pausanias 10.6.2; 10.32.7; Plutarch, *Moralia* 953 D; Diodorus of Sicily 4.3.

<sup>34</sup>Pausanias 10.6.2.

<sup>35</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 953 D.

<sup>36</sup>Acts 8:18-24; 14:11-13; 19:11-17. For the incorporation of the name of Jesus in magical charms see *PGM* 4.3007-3086; W.L. Knox, "Jewish Liturgical Exorcism," *HTR* 31 (1938) 193-194.

<sup>37</sup>Plato, *Phaedo* 62b; *Cratylus* 400 c; *Laws* 870 d-e; *Meno* 81 b; Xenocrates, *Frag.* 20; Aristotle, *Frag.* 60.

<sup>38</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 362 B.

<sup>39</sup>Plato, *Republic* 2.363 D.

was pagan precedent for such a surfeit of food at sacred feasts.<sup>40</sup> The dining room of the god is still to be seen adjoining a temple at Corinth, and Paul had to remind new believers not to be seen feasting in the idol's temple.<sup>41</sup> Even outside the temple, meat offered to idols remained a problem to recent converts and called for consideration on the part of the more mature.<sup>42</sup> They were to refrain from the consumption of sacrificial offerings in the presence of those who still viewed it as a pagan cult activity.

Other aspects of Greek popular religion were also present in the Corinthian congregation. One is a curious practice of the ritual cursing of a divine figure, especially Hercules.<sup>43</sup> Like Jesus, Hercules was said to have returned from beyond the grave. Paul admonishes the Corinthians that the Holy Spirit does not sanction cursing when it is applied to Jesus (12:3).

Cursing could be used to consign an individual to a deity associated with the world of the dead.<sup>44</sup> It afforded women a means of venting hostility.<sup>45</sup> The rites of Demeter comprised the Great Mysteries of Eleusis. These mysteries, declared Cicero, comprised Greece's greatest gift to the civilized world.<sup>46</sup> But women sometimes gravitated toward other aspects of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, the queen of the netherworld. Desperate women called upon these goddesses, as well as Hecate and Dionysos, to curse individuals with whom they were vexed.<sup>47</sup> The curses were written on tablets of lead and deposited in the sanctuaries of the two goddesses, in the graves of the prematurely dead, in the sea, and in wells. Curses, largely those of women, have been discovered on Sicily, in a well at Athens, and nailed to an altar in Cnidos, a city to the south of Ephesus. In a world where women had little other recourse against injustice they committed their concerns to the vengeance of the mighty deities of the netherworld. The Christian message offered other options.<sup>48</sup>

## XII. SEXUAL ELEMENTS AND FERTILITY

In an underpopulated world, women were valued for their fertility. In the production of male heirs they found significance for their own lives. One of the

<sup>40</sup>Athenaeus, *Deip.* 292 D.

<sup>41</sup>1 Cor 8:10; 10:16–21.

<sup>42</sup>1 Cor 8:9–13; 10:24–29; Rom 14:13–23.

<sup>43</sup>L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford, 1921) 156–159. For cursing related to Dionysos see Farnell, *Cults of the Greek City States*, 5, 104, 211–212.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. e.g. Demosthenes 24.151; Isocrates 4.157; Andocides, *De Myst.* 96 f.

<sup>45</sup>J. A. Haldane, "A Scene in the *Thesmophiazusae* (295–371)," *Philologus* 109/1–2 (1965) 44.

<sup>46</sup>Cicero, *De Legibus* 2.4.

<sup>47</sup>Farnell, *Cults of City States*, 3, 99, 104.

<sup>48</sup>C. T. Newton, *Halicarnassus, Cnidos, and Branchidae* (London, 1863), 2, 401, 419–420, 425–426; D. Jordan, "Hekatika," *Glotta* 58 (1980) 62–65; "Two Inscribed Lead Tablets from a Well in the Athenian Kerameikos," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Athenische Abteilung* 95 (1980) 225–249.

major functions of their religion was to promote the fertility that they themselves so much desired and that was so expected of them. Ritual obscenity, often a duty of women, drew condemnation in the Pauline epistles, as did the ritual promiscuity so often associated with the rites of Dionysos. The required sexual actions, sometimes including rape, insured salvation, union with the gods, and immortality. Instead of a salvation based on sexuality, Paul granted to women the right to remain unmarried if they so desired, as well as absolute equality in conjugal prerogatives (1 Corinthians 7).

Ritual promiscuity appears to have been part of the problem at Corinth. At least it is hard to imagine why the Christians spoke with pride and complacency of the sexual impropriety in their midst unless there was some cultic basis. Such a basis can be found in a city whose patron was Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and had once boasted hundreds of sacred prostitutes in her temple. Below the temple in the crowded city, hundreds of other courtesans plied their trade in honor of the same goddess. Their prayers were said to have special potency.

In such an environment, families of respectable women placed a high priority on their propriety. There were, however, decided differences in determining that propriety. For instance, bare heads were required of women in certain of the pagan mystery cults, not to mention nakedness and indecent exposure. Pulling the skirts up to the waist was in some circumstances a pious gesture.<sup>49</sup> A fresco of Dionysiac initiation from the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii reveals a female nudity that would find little reception in a Judeo-Christian worship service. Among feminine worshipers of the god Dionysos removal of the head-covering and disheveled hair could also bespeak resistance. Indeed women sometimes used their worship of Dionysos, the Roman Bacchos, as a vehicle of protest.<sup>50</sup> Vergil's Amata tried to use a Dionysiac revel to arouse public opinion against her husband, who planned to give their daughter in marriage against the mother's wishes. The other mothers rally to her:

Necks bare, and hair left free to the winds. . . . "Evoe, Bacchus," she shrieks. . . .  
 "Ho, mothers of Latium, give ear where'er ye be! If in your loyal hearts still lives affection for unhappy Amata, if care for a mother's rights still stings your souls, doff the fillets from your hair, join the revels with me."<sup>51</sup>

In this case the uncovered head and unbound hair was to signify both commitment to the strange god of wine and madness and at the same time repudiation of male injustice.

### XIII. MALE AND FEMALE ATTIRE

On the other hand, head-covering was expedient for Jewish women, among whom properly bound hair and veiling was obligatory unless they wished a divorce. Speaking to a man without a head-covering was a sure sign of a wom-

<sup>49</sup>Herodotus 2.60; Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 2.17-18.

<sup>50</sup>See R. Kraemer, *HTR* 72/3-4 (1979) 55-80.

<sup>51</sup>Ovid, *Aeneid* 6.384 ff.

an's promiscuity, and to participate in a service unveiled would be a flagrant defiance of her husband, hardly conducive of positive family relations.

Upper-class Roman women might go uncovered, but the lower-class women in the provinces usually wore a veil. The women of Paul's home town Tarsus were routinely veiled, though Dio Chrysostom complained that this did not necessarily make them any more chaste.<sup>52</sup> Since the congregation at Corinth met next door to the synagogue and was composed of both Jewish and Gentile women, universal veiling of women would certainly cause the least offense.

The veiling issue had other ramifications as well. A careful reading of 1 Corinthians 11 demonstrates that the instruction is equally explicit about proper attire and hairstyle for men. The short hair and uncovered head demanded of men makes little sense in the light of the long hair of Absalom and Samson and the head-coverings of the Levitical priests. The warriors of Homer's *Iliad* were described as the long-haired Achaeans. How, then, can nature teach that long hair is a disgrace on a man? The answer may lie in the deliberate sex reversal practiced in some of the cults, most commonly manifested in clothing exchange.

Such sex reversal was a specific distinctive of the Dionysiac cult and by the second century A.D. was considered to be indispensable to the religion.<sup>53</sup> Men wore veils and long hair as signs of their dedication to the god, while women used the unveiling and shorn hair to indicate their devotion.<sup>54</sup> Men masqueraded as women, and in a rare vase painting from Corinth a woman is dressed in satyr pants equipped with the male organ. Thus she dances before Dionysos, a deity who had been raised as a girl and was himself called male-female and "sham man."<sup>55</sup>

The sex exchange that characterized the cults of such great goddesses as Cybele, the Syrian goddess, and Artemis of Ephesus was more grisly. Males voluntarily castrated themselves and assumed women's garments.<sup>56</sup> A relief from Rome shows a high priest of Cybele. The castrated priest wears veil, necklaces, earrings and feminine dress. He is considered to have exchanged his sexual identity and to have become a she-priest.

<sup>52</sup>R. Macmullen, "Women in Public in the Roman Empire," *Historia* 28 (1980) 208-218. For the tradition at Tarsus of veiling women so that even their faces were covered cf. Dio Chrysostom (A.D. 40-c. 112), *The Thirty-Third Discourse* 48 (LCL). "Many of the customs still in force reveal in one way or another the sobriety and severity of deportment of those earlier days. Among these is the convention regarding feminine attire, a convention which prescribes that women should be so arrayed and should so deport themselves in the street that nobody should see any part of them, neither of the face nor of the rest of the body, and that they themselves might not see anything off the road. And yet what could they see as shocking as what they hear? Consequently, beginning the process of corruption with the ears, most of them have come to utter ruin."

<sup>53</sup>Philostratos, *Imagines* 1.2; Aristides, *Rhet.* 41.9 (ed. Keil); Euripides, *Bacchae* 836, 852.

<sup>54</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 266 C-E; Athenaeus 12.525; Lucian, *Dea Syria* 6.

<sup>55</sup>Farnell, *Cults of City States*, 5. 275-280.

<sup>56</sup>Ovid, *Met.* 4.237; Catullus 63.5; Martial, *Epigram* 3.81.3; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 35.48, 165; Lucretius 2.611.

By contrast Paul asked Christians to maintain their own identity in a clear differentiation of the sexes in garments, hairstyle and self-expression (1 Cor 11:2–16). The veil is used as a symbol of commitment, while a strongly egalitarian statement reminds both men and women that neither is independent of the other and that both sexes find their origin in God (11:11–12). In its context it calls for an end to segregated religion based upon sex hostility, exclusivity, and a desire to claim an inside track on spiritual knowledge. I believe that the context also puts the silence of women within a call for mutual concern for the edification of others, as over against disruptive and meaningless shouting. These decrees take on new meaning if Paul is speaking out against vestigial pagan practices in a newly-converted congregation.

It is my contention that the Pauline mandates deserve a great deal of very careful scrutiny and that they must be examined not only in the light of their context in the NT writings but also against a background of contemporary attitudes and practice. To do this we must know far more about the religions of ancient women. We must use literary evidence, archeological monuments, coins, papyri, and art historic materials such as vase and wall paintings. The language of the difficult passages about women, and especially the *hapax legomena* that they contain, have not received adequate attention. Too often students of the NT have disregarded the relevance of such evidence to the understanding of a vexed problem.

If we are to deal with the hard sayings about women in the Pauline corpus, let us do so with integrity. Let us not discard them until we have examined them to the very best of our collective ability. Let us use all the resources at our disposal to study the texts more intensively and to build a larger picture of the context. Let us not be too proud to reach out to those in other disciplines—the classicist, the archeologist, the epigraphist, the papyrologist, the art historian, the numismatist.

Your church and mine are in a state of crisis over the interpretation of these very passages. I believe that there are positive and constructive answers to our dilemma if we will invest the time and trouble to find them.