



CHRISTIANITY -- *The turning point in the history of women* (Part 1)

Out of all religions and cultures, Christianity elevates women to the highest level. Too many people are unaware of the low position women held in ancient times. Athenian women were only a small step above slaves by the 5th century BC. They weren't allowed to leave their homes without their husbands, neither to talk to other men, even in their own home. From birth, a girl was not expected to learn how to read or write, or to get an education. On reading and writing, Menander, one of the most popular writers of Antiquity, wrote, "Teaching a woman to read and write? What a terrible thing to do! Like feeding a vile snake to make it more poisonous."

The Greek wife had no freedom either; she was to be kept "under lock and key." Women could not go out just whenever they liked and were generally at the mercy of their male relatives and husbands. Marriage was considered nothing more than a social contract perpetuated to protect property and ensure the continuation of a family's bloodline. Women then were treated as objects to be traded and used according to men's desire.

During the Old Testament era, compared to other cultures of the time, Jewish women enjoyed great liberty and esteem, and many women distinguished themselves as prophetesses and leaders in Jewish society. Women such as Esther, Hannah, Miriam, Rachel, Rebekah, Rahab, Ruth and Sarah played important and decisive roles in Israel's history.

However, by the time of Jesus, women no longer had the freedoms and status they had enjoyed in the Old Testament era. Jewish society had become very much male-dominated. Women were considered to be inferior beings and were assigned almost the same status as slaves. They were not educated and were confined to mostly domestic duties.

In fact, the Pharisees and other religious leaders at that time, who prayed numerous times each day, always thanked God, in their prayers, for three specific things (amongst others):

- God, thank You that I am a Jew and not a Gentile.
- God, thank You that I am free and not a slave.
- And lastly...God, thank You that I am a man and NOT a woman.

Jewish women were in essence deprived of basic freedoms: when the woman ceased to be under the authority of her father, she came under the control of her husband. As such, a husband could legally physically chastise his wife. If she committed adultery or some other serious offense, he could even kill her. Women were not allowed to leave their home without their father's or husband's permission. They could not testify in court as they were considered unreliable witnesses. They could not appear in public places and were not allowed to talk to strangers. They had to be doubly veiled when they left their home. Marriage and family law in those times favoured men over women. For example, a husband could divorce a wife if he chose to, but a wife could not divorce a husband without his consent.

But two godly women of this time were chosen by God and became models of faithfulness and virtue: Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist.

The birth of Jesus was the turning point in the history of woman. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus's attitude toward women was radically different from what was customary at the time, one which raised their status. Through both His teachings and actions, He rebuffed the common beliefs and practices which espoused that women were inferior to men.

One example is His interaction with the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John. At that time, Jews didn't interact with the Samaritans at all, yet Jesus requested that she give Him a drink from the well, to her great surprise. Jesus not only ignored the fact that she was a Samaritan, but He also spoke with her in public, which contravened the Jewish religious law that said: "*He who talks with a woman in public brings evil upon himself.*" Jesus broke that rule again when He entered into Mary and Martha's home, and taught Mary about godly principles, since yet another rabbinic teaching was "*Let the words of the Law be burned rather than taught to women.*" He broke both laws many times by talking to and teaching women.

Another remarkable example is found in John 8: 1-11, where the religious leaders brought in a woman caught in adultery and said to Jesus, "In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do You say?" Even though she had been caught "in the actual act of adultery", only the woman was brought. Where was the man? As far as Jesus was concerned, the man was as guilty as the woman, and He answered: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Thus causing the accusers to all leave, one by one, starting by the oldest ones. But this didn't mean that no sin had occurred. Jesus took sin very seriously and He said to the woman, calling gently on her to repent and stop: "Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again."

The Gospels all record that women followed Jesus, which was very unusual at that time, as other Jewish teachers and rabbis did not have women disciples, and women normally stayed home and attended to domestic duties. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared first to women, and instructed them to tell the rest of His disciples that He had risen.

In the Gospels, we see that Jesus had compassion for women who were widows. He raised a widow's son from the dead, denounced the religious leaders for taking financial advantage of them, and commended the poor widow who sacrificially gave two mites (the smallest and least valuable coin in circulation in Judea at the time) as an offering to the temple.

In spite of some claims that Christianity oppresses women, the historical record shows just the opposite. Women were oppressed in almost every culture prior to the coming of Christianity. By elevating sexual morality, and by conferring upon women a much higher status, the Christian religion revolutionised the place and prestige of women.

For example, the great importance given to marriage meant that women were spared much of the abuse and mistreatment that they were accustomed to. The way Jesus treated women was in stark contrast to the surrounding culture. In Roman law, women were relegated to a low status in society and were viewed as the property of their husbands. Jesus changed all that. Today, women have rights because of what Jesus exemplified.

Admittedly there were some anomalies later in the church's history, when chauvinistic and anti-feminine views were allowed to re-enter parts of the church. But such aberrations must not detract from the truly revolutionary elevation of the status of women achieved by Christianity. (*To be continued*)