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# FLESH AND BLOOD: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S IDENTITY AND RELIGION IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

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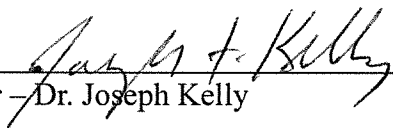
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FLESH AND BLOOD: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S  
IDENTITY AND RELIGION IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN.

An Essay Submitted to  
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For the Degree of  
Master of Arts

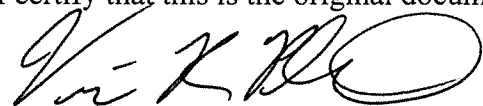
By  
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2015

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## Introduction

Women's roles in religion have been a topic of some interest over the past few years, with much scholarship and argumentation surrounding theological ideas and historical realities. This paper does not seek to add new material to the understanding of what women's religious roles were in the ancient Mediterranean, but rather to look at those roles and other religious proscriptions and examine how women related to their religions. In essence, what drew them to their religions? What did the religions have to say about them as women? Were the goals or requirements of the religion different between men and women, relying on a concrete sexual identity, and was that identity a primary factor in shaping a woman's interaction with religion? Using a historical-critical approach, this essay will explore how women related to the Greco-Roman, Gnostic, and Christian religions in the ancient Mediterranean in the 1<sup>st</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, especially in regard to their identity *as* women.

Certainly identity in general had much to do with religion in the ancient world. Ethnic identity played one of the largest roles in determining religion, and often these identities were communal. There is evidence for patron deities for specific cities, seen as early as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. If one individual offended the gods, the whole of the community had to appease them or be punished. Similarly, if one underwent a conversion, as the jailer in Acts 16 did, the whole of his household joined him in that conversion. Jews, of course, had a synonymous relationship with their ethnic and religious identity. Different geographic locations might have specific associations with the acts of deities, which in turn lead to location-specific rites. There were also family gods, the *Lares* and *Penates*, and some families claimed ancestral heritage with deity, as

Julius Caesar's family did with Venus. Occupation or even social class identities could likewise determine religious practices.

However, one of the most basic identities, at least equal to if not more important than ethnicity, was sex. From the moment of birth, an individual was identified as either male or female. No matter what nation, family, social class, or occupation one was born into or changed to, the male/female identity remained.<sup>1</sup> For men, this identity was often less significant in terms of determining their lives than other additional identifiers. A man might be identified primarily by where he was from, who his family was, or what he did for a living. The fact that he was a man was foundational to all of this, but not as formational in his larger identity. However, the female identity greatly impacted how a woman related to society, family, occupation, and religion without as great an emphasis on other identity modifiers.

With that in mind, this paper examines how women are spoken of in religious texts both as specific individuals and as a whole. Certain religious concepts are equated with women and can shed light on how a woman might have seen herself in regard to religion and the divine. Although comprised of many different cults, the Greco-Roman religion, or classical paganism, tended to have a unified idea of the divine and material worlds and how those worlds interacted. Many people might worship numerous gods, even if some of the gods were not within their home pantheon. By looking at a variety of geographic locations and cults, a broad picture of the relationship between Greco-Roman women and their religion can be painted. The Gnostics were similar in having a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Eunuchs present a fairly unique case in Western thought because they at one time had been considered fully male and still retained some aspects of masculinity. To be a eunuch was to have been mutilated or perhaps stripped of one's original identity.

cosmogonies, but a particular shared conception both in regard to metaphysical feminine beings and consistent attitudes towards human women in their various writings. While there is limited information about what Gnostic women did in practicing their religion (since there is limited information on any Gnostic practices), the topic of women comes up fairly frequently in a variety of texts; and so acceptable extrapolation may be made concerning them, their identity, and their relationship to religion. Lastly, Christianity had a variety of practices that differed from region to region, but from fairly early on had a corpus of church writings that were well known across the Mediterranean.

Thus, this paper will investigate how women's identity, being rooted either in their physical bodies or a more spiritual gender identity, affected their interaction with religion by looking at the Greco-Roman, Gnostic, and Christian religions, as each had a varying emphasis on the spiritual and differing views of the material. Ultimately, it will show that women in the Greco-Roman tradition operated primarily in regard to the special physical circumstances dictated by female bodies, women in the Gnostic tradition were regarded as spiritually inferior, which was paired with an anti-materialist worldview, and early Christianity began with women relating to God and salvation as primarily human, rather than women.<sup>2</sup>

### **Women's Identity and Role in Pagan Religion**

It is difficult to say what a woman involved in Greco-Roman religious practice thought or felt about her religious identity and interactions with the divine. We have no written sources that give us insight into their psychological state or even their private

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<sup>2</sup> As time went on, the relationship between women and the spiritual began to more closely resemble both the Gnostic suppression of women's spiritual nature and the Greco-Roman focus on the physical body, but this was not representative of the initial relationship between women and Christianity.

thoughts about their roles in religious practice. What we can do is extrapolate from the rituals women were involved in; if not getting a sense of their feelings, we certainly can get an idea of their roles and how pagan women fit into the religious sphere.

Unlike so many of the religions today, the Greco-Roman religions did not emphasize the concept of the soul. While many myths and some of the mystery cults certainly demonstrate that there was such a concept, it was often tied into the physical reality of life; Odysseus recognizes Achilles' ghost in the underworld while Eurydice's spirit must follow Orpheus back up to the land of the living. There is no evidence of individuals having a spiritual identity separate from their physical identity. Women's roles and identity in religion, therefore, were shaped by the physical and societal realities of being women in the ancient world. How they related to deities and religion was first and foremost shaped by the physical reality of being female.

It is undisputed that men in the ancient Mediterranean world held the vast bulk of the power. In Rome, the emperors, senators, proconsuls, and other officials were all men. A woman, while she could be a citizen, could neither vote nor hold public office and was considered to be under the guardianship of her husband, father, or another male relative. This guardianship, however, could be removed under certain circumstances, such as a woman being mother to at least three children. Women were also capable of owning land and other property independently of their spouse or male relatives. They were able to engage in business, work estates, invest, lend, and borrow. At least one woman lent Cicero money, and two owed him money.<sup>3</sup> Other areas, while under Roman law, followed geographic cultural traditions that could vary greatly depending on location. In Greece,

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3 Gaston Boissier, *Cicero and his Friends: A study of Roman Society in the Time of Caesar*, (London, A.D. Innes and Co., 1897), 96.

women were traditionally fairly limited, with a very distinct separation of spheres between men and women. Elsewhere, some aristocratic women had considerable power, but it was important to maintain socially-acceptable roles. Often women were not expected to take a large part in public life, but to be mainly in the house. There was an emphasis, not on women alone, but on how the individual fit into society as a whole; what her part was and how she could fulfill her role well. While the first and second centuries held more opportunities and freedom for some women, it is worth bearing in mind that they were in no way considered the equal of men legally, politically, or domestically. Indeed, some of the few public positions in the pagan world that women held were religious ones.

Also worthy of note is that women were segregated from each other by class and social situation, rarely interacting in complete unity and solidarity with one another. Marital status, social status (plebeian or patrician), and legal status all played large roles in both religion and self-conception.<sup>4</sup> What one woman did or was able to accomplish was not representative of women as a whole, and it is not likely that women would have seen an extraordinary woman as changing universal roles or making lasting societal changes. Indeed, many religious rites in Rome were limited to certain sets of women, such as the *matronae*, free-born Roman women who were legally married and able to produce legal heirs. Freedwomen, slaves, and foreigners were excluded.

In the same vein, there were distinct differences between human women and goddesses. The deities were not simply humans writ large, they were completely 'other' and not limited to or conflated with mortal women and their social role. Goddesses were

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4 Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 50.



thought to hold considerable power and influence over many important factors of life, including that of the state. They were figures of power that men as well as women worshiped, but they were not seen as representative of women's power over men in any way.<sup>5</sup>

Religious leadership did not always correlate to secular power or relate back to regular male/female dynamics within the Greco-Roman culture. Further, leadership in ancient religion could take many different forms. Often a religious leader held a position for a cycle rather than for life. For example, the priest of Demeter was not chosen for life but rather every four years for the celebration of the mysteries of Demeter. Tradition also allowed the priest to choose a wife at this time, although that was not required, demonstrating the wider social roles and expectations involved with religious positions.<sup>6</sup> Other periods were longer, such as the Vestal Virgins who served for 30 years. Some leaders were chosen only for a festival, such as the Sixteen of the *Heraea*, but were eligible to be picked again. Sometimes these leaders derived their primary identity from their religious roles while others would be thought of as filling in a necessary role for a period of time before returning to their more routine identities.

For the lay person as well as religious leaders, religion in the ancient Mediterranean was at once all-pervasive and neatly compartmentalized, one cult from another. There were gods and goddesses for almost every aspect of life (early Christian apologists claimed this showed the absurdity of paganism), and numerous foreign cults

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5 Valerie Abrahamsen, "Women at Philippi: the Pagan and Christian Evidence," *Journal Of Feminist Studies In Religion* 3, no. 2 (September 1, 1987), 24. There were, of course, female mystery cults that did not admit men, as shall be seen, but these were still defined by their very femaleness which reinforced the social conditions of women.

6 Pausanias *Descriptions of Greece*, 2.14.1: Translated by Jones, W. H. S. and Omerod, H. A. *Loeb Classical Library* Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1918. This translation will be used throughout the paper.

also gained significant followings. In this sense, it was an extremely pluralistic society filled with dozens of separate cults with their own feasts, rituals, and clergy; all the while the people could be involved in the worship of several different deities.<sup>7</sup> The imperial cult was spread throughout the Roman Empire, and most cities also had one or more patron gods and goddesses. Other natural features such as streams, trees, rivers, and mountains might also be deified or be inhabited by a supernatural being of some variety. Some individuals considered a specific deity to be a very personal god or goddess (Cicero and Bona Dea<sup>8</sup>) and Roman families had their household gods (called Penates or Lares), unique to their family.

While the household gods, city gods, and the Imperial cult were not chosen by individuals, the worship of other deities could depend on a person's affinity, preference, or situation. A farmer would be likely to venerate Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, a sailor might worship Poseidon, god of the seas. As such, women tended to worship the deities that had dominion over the areas that most affected women's lives. In Philippi, women were far more likely to give offerings to goddesses than gods, with the one exception of Asklepius, the god of healing.<sup>9</sup> This makes perfect sense, as goddesses such as Hera, Demeter, Hestia, Artemis, and Athena all touched on the distinctly feminine purviews such as marriage and childbirth, while health affects everyone. In fact, in Rome, there were two shrines to the Carmentes, one called *Postverta* (head first) and *Proversa* (feet first) set up specifically for women to worship at in order to avert a breech-birth.<sup>10</sup>

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7 Sarah Iles Johnson, "Mysteries," in *Ancient Religions*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard, 2007), 6.

8 Kraemer, 53.

9 Helen McClees, *A Study of Women in Attic Inscriptions*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1920), 17.

10 Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights*, 16.16: Translated. J.C. Rolfe. . *Loeb Classical Library* Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1927. This translation will be used

Many of these goddesses also had festivals to mark specifically feminine occurrences, such as the movement from adolescence to marrying age and after marriage to motherhood.

One such festival may have been the *Heraea*, games held in Elis every four years and dedicated to Hera, who was associated with marriage. Legend claimed that the games were founded by Hippodameia in thanks to Hera for her marriage to Pelops. Pausanius (110-180 CE) describes these games consisting of foot-races for maidens, dressed in short tunics reaching a bit above the knee and wearing their hair loose. They competed by age group, and the winning maidens received crowns of olive, the option to dedicate statues with their names inscribed on them, and a portion of the cow sacrificed to Hera.<sup>11</sup> These games were presided over by the Sixteen Women, all of whom were married and traditionally chosen from the sixteen cities of Elis and considered to be “the oldest, the most noble, and the most esteemed of all the women.”<sup>12</sup> The Sixteen Women led the games, arranged two choral dances, and were in charge of weaving a robe for Hera, all after purifying themselves.

The *Heraea* bear great resemblance to the *Arkteia* festival at Brauron, near Athens, which was dedicated to Artemis.<sup>13</sup> This festival was more explicitly connected to puberty rites, as participation in these games may have been a prerequisite for marriage,

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throughout the paper.

11 One of the key ways historians can track worship of the ancient cults is through dedications or inscriptions of worshipers' names, usually inscribed after a donation of some sort. Garcia points out that often the women in these inscriptions are co-dedicants, under their husbands or other male family members: Carbo Garcia, Juan Ramon, “Women and Oriental Cults in Roman Dacia,” *Studia Antiqua Et Archeologica* 18, 254.

12 Pausanius, *Descriptions of Greece*, 5.16.5.

13 While this festival was known to have taken place in the second century BCE, there is no direct evidence of when it may have ceased to be practiced. Likely it was no longer being celebrated by the first-second century CE, but it still serves as an illustration of what all-female games may have looked like and the emphases they may have had.

and the games themselves were perhaps ways for the girls to display their good qualities to potential husbands.<sup>14</sup> All such games were held in public, with an audience that would have contained men. Such festivals and games have more to do with the feminine aspects of life as a woman than any sort of disconnected idea of the metaphysical. Those participating in the festival participated because they were female, and female of a certain age, preparing for certain female activities and roles. Without the presence of the feminine, the festival would have no point whatsoever.

It is also important to note that this festival was organized and led by women. The Sixteen were undoubtedly the leaders of the entire production. Certainly they were well-respected women of their communities who had a certain amount of respect and authority before being named one of the Sixteen. However, the *Heraea* was almost entirely a woman's festival, even if men were part of the audience. The Sixteen had structured authority over other women and in a specific and delineated context. Aside from watching, men did not participate at all. Overwhelmingly, in Greco-Roman religion women were participants in religion, but not in positions of authority over the affairs of men. As exemplified by these games, when women did hold leadership positions, often it was over other women or having to do specifically with tasks that would affect women.

In the case of the Roman Vestal Virgins, their tasks were thought to pertain to the well-being of the whole of Rome, while at the same time being off-limits to the male colleges of priests. They were the priestesses of the Vesta, the goddess of the hearth, which was an object at the ritual and literal core of every Roman house. The Vestal Virgins tended the hearth fire for all of Rome, keeping the sacred fire lit at all times. As

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<sup>14</sup> Kraemer, 22.

their name suggests, the Vestal Virgins took vows of chastity for as long as they served, a period of thirty years. After this they were allowed to marry, although Plutarch emphasizes that few did and when they did, often the marriages were unhappy.<sup>15</sup>

The Vestal Virgins had several privileges as priestesses that set them apart from most other women. They had the right to make a will while their fathers still lived, as well as managing their own affairs without any male guardian. If they happened to cross the path of a criminal on his way to execution, the criminal's life was spared (after the Vestal Virgin vowed that it was not a purposeful meeting). The Vestals also had political pull and power. For example, when a young Julius Caesar was included in Sulla's proscriptions,<sup>16</sup> the Vestal Virgins managed to have him pardoned.<sup>17</sup> The leader of the Vestals was the Vestalis Maxima, and she sat on the College of the Pontiffs as the most important of Rome's high priestesses. It is interesting to note that, while the Vestals had their own leader, the Pontifex Maximus is specifically listed as not only presiding over the priests of Rome in general, but explicitly being the overseer of the Vestal Virgins:

The chief of the Pontifices, the Pontifex Maximus, had the duty of expounding and interpreting the divine will, or rather of directing sacred rites, not only being in charge of public ceremonies, but also watching over private sacrifices, and preventing any departure from established custom, as well as teaching whatever was requisite for the worship or propitiation of the gods. He was also overseer of the holy virgins called Vestals.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Vestals had great power and admiration, their religious duties

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15 Plutarch *Parallel Lives* 10.2: Translated by Bernadotte Perrin, *Loeb Classical Library* Volume I. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1923. This translation will be used throughout the paper.

16 Sulla was dictator of Rome from 82–79 BCE and enacted proscriptions, public identification and condemnation of enemies of the state against his political rivals. The names of these enemies of the state were put on a list hung in the forum; those on the list were stripped of citizenship and excluded from any protection of the law. A reward was given to anyone who gave information that led to the death of such men. The fact that the Vestal Virgins were able to protect Julius Caesar from this proscription demonstrates the power they wielded.

17 Suetonius *Julius Caesar*, 1.2.

18 Plutarch *Parallel Lives*, 9.4.

centered around not only their female identity, but their identity as virgins. Plutarch muses that Numa, a king of Rome to whom he attributes the formation of the Vestals, entrusted the worship and care of the perpetual fire to their charge either “because the nature of fire [is] pure and uncorrupted, and therefore [Numa] entrusted it to chaste and undefiled persons, or because he thought of it as unfruitful and barren, and therefore associated it with virginity.”<sup>19</sup> When a woman became a Vestal Virgin, she ceased to be a daughter of her father and instead became the daughter of the state. Her status as a virgin was thought to directly affect the well-being of Rome, just as the continual burning of the flames did. If one of the Vestal Virgins was found to have broken her vow of chastity (considered treason and incest<sup>20</sup>), she was buried alive near the Colline Gate, so as not to spill her blood. If a Vestal Virgin was found guilty of some other infraction, such as letting the fire go out, the Pontifex Maximus would whip the virgin on her bare flesh, in a dark place with a curtain between them, so that even during punishment modesty might be preserved.

Other high religious offices held by Roman women were tied to their roles as wives. The *Flamen Dialis* was the high priest of Jupiter and his wife was the *Flaminica Dialis*, whose participation in certain rituals was considered essential (for example, sacrificing a ram to Jupiter, which only she could do). She was required to be a virgin at the time of her marriage, and the couple was not permitted to divorce. If she died, the *Flamen Dialis* was required to resign, as he could not properly perform many of the rituals without his wife. This was very similar to the *Rex Sacrorum* and his wife, the

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19 Plutarch *Parallel Lives*, 9.5–6.

20 This was considered incest since the Vestal was a daughter of the state, and therefore all citizens were her siblings.

*Regina Sacrorum*. The *Rex Sacrorum* was a senatorial priesthood, and both the priest and his wife had specific duties to fulfill as a pair, often involving public sacrifices.

Additionally, like the *Flamen Dialis*, the *Rex Sacrorum* had to resign if his wife died, as he would no longer be able to perform his duties.

Other Roman women's traditions did not focus on the husband and wife acting as a pair, but did limit the celebration to the *matronae*. These women participated in *Matronalia* (Juno Lucina), *Veneralia* (Venus), and *Vestalia* (Vesta) as well as *Carmentalia* (the Carmentes mentioned earlier) among others. All of these festivals center around goddesses and the feminine aspects they presided over. They also were very personal, involving both public worship with titled leadership positions and private worship in the home. In this latter case, the woman's acts of worship served to take care of her and her family, where her identity would be that of wife and mother, under the leadership of her husband. As a whole, the religious roles of women served to reinforce the already existing social roles.

Even the rites of Dionysus, which involved ecstatic rituals, served as moments of role-reversals which in turn reinforced the normal societal rules.<sup>21</sup> Men and women participated in the festivals dedicated to Dionysus, but the women acted out the part of the Meanads or Bacchae, who in myth were women cursed by Dionysus with insanity and led groups of dancing women up into the mountains. In the myth they wore deerskin, loosed their hair, and wore ivy and snakes around their necks, tearing through the countryside and causing harm and havoc. The actual rites were considered secret, but generally occurred at night and included dancing as the women of the town or city were

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21 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 200–203.

lead by the priestess of Dionysus to the mountains, as described by Pausanias: “The Thyiads are Attic women, who with the Delphian women go to Parnassus every other year and celebrate orgies in honor of Dionysus.”<sup>22</sup> Additionally, these rites, while again lead by women and for women, even in acting against the societal norms, were not considered acceptable for men to take part.<sup>23</sup> The identity as women was necessary to play the role of the Meanads. These rites were restricted to women, but the cult as a whole was not, and there is considerable evidence that men were often initiated; generally there were public rites for the city and private rites in which only the women participated.<sup>24</sup>

When these Bacchic rites spread to Rome in the later second century BCE, they were considered suspicious and the subject of ugly speculation, in part because of the male/female dynamics. Livy (59 BC – AD 17 ) gives a memorable tale regarding these rites, although he is hardly an unbiased source and the actual history may be suspect. Still, he conveys what was possibly a common point of view of the time. In his story, Livy relates that:

They had started as a rite for women, and it was the rule that no man should be admitted. There had been three fixed days in a year on which initiations took place, at daytime, into the Bacchic mysteries; and it was the custom for the matrons to be chosen as priestesses in rotation. But when Paculla Annia of Campania was priestess she altered all this, ostensibly on the advice of the gods. She had been the first to initiate men, her sons, Minius and Herennius Cerrinius; and she had performed the ceremonies by night instead of by day, and in place of three days in a year she had appointed five days of initiation in each month. From the time when the rites were held promiscuously, with men and women mixed together, and when the license offered by darkness had been added, no sort of crime, no kind of immorality, was left unattempted. There were more obscenities practiced between men than between men and women. Anyone refusing to submit

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22 Pausanias 10.4.3.

23 Pausanias 40.

24 Kraemer, 39.



to outrage or reluctant to commit crimes was slaughtered as a sacrificial victim. To regard nothing as forbidden was among these people the summit of religious achievement. Men, apparently out of their wits, would utter prophecies with frenzied bodily convulsions.<sup>25</sup>

From this, it can be seen that the rites were considered harmless and acceptable when they were confined to women and held during the day. When men were admitted under the behest of the priestess, the rites began to include unacceptable behavior, notably between men. Because these rites went so far and subverted the social roles of men and women, the practitioners of this cult were wiped out. Again, the historicity of this event is suspect, but the first century Roman attitude demonstrated here shows both the importance of religions re-enforcing societal roles and the delineation between men and women's religious activities.<sup>26</sup> What was acceptable for women to do was not acceptable for men to be a part of; not because the women were so highly respected, but because it was so shameful for men to participate. At the same time, in Greece at least, these rites were honorable things for women to participate in, to the point that when a group of women playing the role of the *Meanads* were lost in a snowstorm and wandered into enemy territory, they were protected.<sup>27</sup>

Part of the language Livy used faulted the Bacchic rites as being foreign. Yet as stated before, Paganism was generally extremely pluralistic, while at the same time reliant to a large extent on the happenstance of birth. The Vestal Virgins' worship of

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25 Livy *Annals*, 39.14: Trans. H. Bettenson. New York: Penguin Classics, 1975. This translation will be used throughout the paper.

26 MacDonald points out that there was an association in the Greco-Roman world between slavery, sexual availability, and prostitution, and so any cults that allowed initiates from multiple socio-economic stations and the 'immodest' intermingling of men and women were likely to be considered depraved and sexually debauched in *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57.

27 Plutarch *On the First Cold*, 18.

Vesta, goddess of the hearth, pertained exclusively to Rome and was unlikely to spread to other geographic areas.<sup>28</sup> However, other deities were not as limited geographically, and there were several cults from outside of Rome that were gaining popularity in the Empire during the first-second centuries or earlier. These cults are commonly called the Oriental or Eastern cults, although they were not referred to as such or considered a set group by the Romans of the time.<sup>29</sup> Adonis and Isis all fall under this category, along with Mithras, Osiris, and Cybele.

The cults of Adonis and Isis both garnered many female worshipers, although both were different in emphasis. The cult of Adonis was, like Dionysus, a mystery religion that had no state celebrations or functions. Likely originating from the Middle East, Adonis was the handsome young lover of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love. He was a dying and rising god tied to the calendar and vegetation. The cult of Adonis was an almost exclusively female cult that had followers throughout the Greco-Roman world, but like the instances of private worship previously mentioned, the cult lacked any titled priesthood or leadership. The primary rites involved women planting quick-sprouting plants and placing them on top of flat-roofed houses, where the plants would wither and die as quickly as they sprung up, perhaps commemorating Adonis' dying-and-rising attributes. Kraemer notes that women may have found the worship of Adonis to be a sort of wishful fantasy of an ideal male lover, ever-youthful, that women

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28 There is evidence of the cult of Vesta in Bovillae, Lavinium, and Tibur, which possibly had their own versions of the Vestal Virgins, although these orders likely predated Rome. See Maria Grazia Cranino Cerere's "Vestalia non di Roma" *Studi di Epigrafia Latina* 20 (2003), 67–80, for a more in-depth look at the worship of Vesta outside of Rome.

29 Carbo Garcia, Juan Ramon, "Women and Oriental Cults in Roman Dacia," *Studia Antiqua Et Archeologica* 18, (2012), 247.

did not experience in their own tightly controlled lives.<sup>30</sup> Regardless, the cult of Adonis is another example of the female identity being the driving force behind religious involvement.

The cult of Isis spreading up from Egypt, on the other hand, attracted both male and female worshipers. Like the Eleusinian Mysteries and Dionysian rites, the Isis cult centered on the individual's journey to the afterlife, as Isis was associated with wisdom and the safe guidance of souls after death. It had shared some similarities with Christianity in this respect: there was a focus on the individual rather than the society, and certainly the afterlife concerned both men and women alike, regardless of gender. However, also like the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter and the Dionysian rites, the salvific aspect of the cult of Isis was only one facet of the goddess' role and the practices surrounding her.

While initially considered a distinctly foreign religion, by the first century CE there were plans for temples to Isis in Rome, and the cult was gradually becoming incorporated into the official Roman pantheon. It has been hypothesized that marginalized groups such as women and slaves initially found the cult of Isis a welcoming alternative venue for religiosity, but as the cult became more accepted and common, this aspect would have been minimized.<sup>31</sup> Traditionally, the priesthood of Isis in Egypt was male, and this trend continued as the cult spread, although there were priestesses, as demonstrated by Plutarch's friend Clea.<sup>32</sup> Both men and women participated together in the cult's major public festivals, and the only description of an

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30 Kraemer, 33.

31 Garcia, 258.

32 Plutarch *Isis and Osiris*, 2.

initiation that has been preserved is that of a man.<sup>33</sup> While Isis was certainly given epithets that identified her as a goddess to women and women initiates held offices in the cult, there is no evidence that a woman was ever the ultimate office of high priest.<sup>34</sup> Yet the draw of women to Isis is easy to see, despite her foreign origins and general purview over life and death. In an aretalogy, or list of the goddess' attributes, Isis proclaims:

I am she that is called goddess by women...  
I brought together woman and man.  
I appointed to women to bring their infants to birth in the tenth month...  
I compelled women to be loved by men...  
I devised marriage contracts.<sup>35</sup>

Once again, the tie between the concerns of a woman and the goddess' domain are bound together.

These examples are not all inclusive of every cult or instance in the Greco-Roman world in the first and second centuries, yet they provide a survey of several different gods and goddesses from multiple locations which all follow the same pattern of worship and role being intrinsically linked to the worshiper's identity as male or female. There are numerous other cults that follow this pattern as well.<sup>36</sup> Throughout these examples, there is a lack of broader spiritual identity; one does not get a sense of all people needing to relate to the deities in a particular way. Rather, the relationship to the deities is based on social status, age, position in life, and gender. The gods and goddesses had dominion over the everyday happenings of Greco-Roman life, and as such the everyday identity of worshippers dictated their relationship with the gods.

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33 Apeleius *Metamorphosis*, 11.

34 Kraemer, 74.

35 The Kyme Aretalogy, in Kraemer, 74.

36 The goddess Cybele was a mother-goddess, and yet her priesthood was made up exclusively of eunuchs; Apollo, while having the famous Pythia, or female oracle at Delphi, also had male oracles, considered his sons, to give two more examples.

## **The Gnostic View of Women**

What is known of Gnosticism points to a religious construction that operated on very different principles than the pagan model. Rather than identities being rooted in the normal social constructs of the day, Gnosticism, at its core, was based on the idea of secret knowledge and, in a sense, a secret reality that was not known by the majority of people. In Gnostic theology, the orthodox Christians of the day did not have a true conception of the world, and the creator-God of the Old Testament was, in fact, a deformed tyrant to be overcome. The Gnostics were also radical dualists who considered the material world to be evil and their conception of salvation was fulfilled in being reunited in the spiritual realm or Pleroma, leaving behind the physical. As such, this was not a religion that had much focus on the everyday aspects of life as Paganism, or even Christianity, did.

However, actions taken on earth were often considered important and means of moving towards individual and universal salvation. There were Gnostic rituals, leaders, sacraments, and prophets of which we have some records. Some assumptions regarding women and their relationships to the divine in Gnosticism can be gained here, but there is also a considerable amount that is simply unknown about Gnostic practices. However, thanks to the Nag Hammadi library, there is a vast collection of Gnostic texts and theology preserved. Using these texts, a fairly clear idea of the Gnostic conception of women and femininity, both in the material world and in the spiritual realm, can be drawn out. Given the limited resources on Gnosticism, this section relies more heavily on the themes of femininity in the Gnostic writings rather than looking at rituals or specific directives concerning women.

As will be shown, this conception was extremely negative. Some authors, such as Pagels, have inferred that because the Gnostics had a goddess figure in Wisdom that they had a more egalitarian view of women and the divine. Yet the narrative surrounding Wisdom is overwhelmingly negative and hardly a divine figure to look up to or hold up as a positive feminine role. Further, multiple Gnostic works seem to indicate that women had to go through an extra salvific step, becoming men, before they could fully partake of their religious narrative of redemption. Ultimately, it seems likely that although many women apparently found Gnosticism attractive, the fact of their femaleness was religiously significant and connected to negative connotations.<sup>37</sup>

One difficulty of addressing Gnosticism is that there were several different groups who were identified under this umbrella, some with significantly different practices and beliefs. Differentiation between the identified groups will be made where possible. Additionally, many of the sources of Gnostic tradition are found in anti-Gnostic writings of various church fathers. Despite the negative conception these writers would have had of Gnosticism, many of their depictions and writings have been found to correspond with various Gnostic documents discovered in the 19th and 20th centuries. Due to this fact, these writers, although hostile, will be treated as relatively reliable.

Although there were many different types of Gnosticism with some significant differences in practices, there is also a uniting and overarching cosmology present within Gnosticism. Some variations exist, but these variations do not provide opposing views of the feminine so much as variations that maintain a consistent negative view of the role of the divine feminine. While many of the phrases and figures are the same as in

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<sup>37</sup> Ireneaus *Against Heresies* 1.13.4.

Christianity, particular emphasis on certain understandings and myths are present in Gnosticism which can completely invert the meaning of a phrase. For example, the title of 'mother' might seem generally positive, until one considers that in the dualist Gnostic tradition, bringing forth material things is not something good or to be sought after, particularly.

In this Gnostic cosmology, the Pleroma<sup>38</sup> (fullness, the totality of divine powers) is a completeness at the center of which is God. Creation of the spiritual world occurred after a period of silence,<sup>39</sup> when God projected thirty emanations called "Aeons." which, in turn, were in fifteen sexually complementary pairs called "syzygies." According to the Valentinian Gnostic tradition, the youngest of these Aeons, Sophia (Wisdom), witnessing the procreative power of God and the syzygies, attempted to conceive on her own. This resulted in her fall from the Pleroma, the separation from her consort, the existence of the demiurge, and the creation of the material world, which is ultimately an imperfection from which one must escape. The Ptolemaic tradition has Sophia searching for the original source God, and in her passionate search she creates the demiurge, with the consequent creation of the (evil or impure) material realm.

As can be seen above, the initial problem is caused by an act done by a female alone, whereas proper offspring are produced from the conjugal relations of a male and female. Ptolemy's version of the Gnostic myth relates it thus: "Now, the other Aeons in similar fashion and more or less in stillness longed to see the emitter of their seed and to inquire about the beginningless root [the highest idea of God]. But Sophia...charged

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38 This Greek word is also used several times in the New Testament, commonly translated as 'fullness' with various uses. Some of the most notable verses are John 1:16, Eph 3:19, and 1 Cor 10:26.

39 Personified silence is considered the female half of the syzygy of God. This half is barely mentioned, seems to take no active part, and is by its very name "Silence." The overwhelming portrayal of the uncreated god is male.

forward and experienced passion without the involvement of her consort.” This was done, the passage goes on to say, “ostensibly out of love but really out of recklessness.” This recklessness, it is explained, was caused by a rootless intellect and desire for knowledge, but knowledge that Sophia could not have. In order to keep Sophia from destroying herself in her pursuit to know her parent, a ‘boundary’ is created, often called by different messianic terms (cross, redeemer, boundary-setter, and emancipator). By having the boundary as her consort Sophia “was purified, established, and restored to membership in a pair” while her “thinking and consequent passion were separated from her: she remained inside the fullness; but her thinking and passion were bounded apart by the boundary...and existed outside the fullness.”<sup>40</sup>

Sophia is the main female figure in Gnostic cosmology, yet as can be seen she is consistently described as recklessly passionate, wanting what she cannot have (whereas another male-aspected Aeon, Intellect, can have knowledge of the parent.) Further, in order to purify her, Sophia is caught up by a boundary and has her 'thinking and its consequent passion' separated from her. This thinking is described as “a spiritual essence...yet it was without form and imageless because she [Sophia] had not comprehended anything. And—they say—for this reason it was a weak and female fruit.”<sup>41</sup> For a figure literally named ‘wisdom,’ Sophia shows unwise behavior and is literally stripped of her thinking. If Gnostic women were to have personally associated themselves on some level with Sophia, the inherent misogyny in such a self-association is astounding. To apply the idea of Sophia as an archetype for women requires the

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40 Irenaeus of Lyon *Against Heresies*, 1.2.2. Trans. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1987). This translation will be used throughout the paper.

41 Ibid. 1.2.4.



acceptance of the notion that women must be paired with a male entity and must accept limited knowledge. To seek out further knowledge is self-destructive. Whether or not Gnostic women say Sophia is an archetype of all women, theologically the position of women in the universe was impacted by Sophia's fall, as can be seen in some of the rituals depicted in the Gospel of Philip.

The Gospel of Philip's depiction of Sophia is not any more positive. An anthology which seems to contain excerpts from various sermons, treatises, philosophical epistles, collected aphorisms, and short dialogues with comments, the Gospel of Philip emphasizes androgyny, which some might conflate with an egalitarian view of the sexes. Yet it is consistently the female parts that are denigrated. The necessity of a male/female dynamic in conception comes up a number of times, such as in this discussion of Mary: "Some said, 'Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit.' They are in error. They do not know what they are saying. When did a woman ever conceive by a woman?"<sup>42</sup> It is not enough for conception to be the effort of two individuals rather than one; it must be between a male/female pair.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, this would have been an empirical fact of nature to the Gnostics, yet it is the female inability to conceive on her own that is consistently brought up in a negative light. The original solitary act of procreation by Sophia not only creates a dysfunctional offspring but also causes Sophia to be cast out of the Pleroma without the separation of her thinking and passion. However, while in this version the concept of thinking as the source of the problem is not identified, Sophia is still, in

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42 Gos Phil 55:23. In Gnostic cosmology, the Holy Spirit is another female-aspected Aeon. trans. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1987). This translation will be used throughout the paper.

43 It should be noted that there seems to be a distinction between (properly) conceiving offspring in the Pleroma and humans conceiving offspring on the material world. The first does not have a negative connotation associated with it. The second, as will be shown, does.

totality, cast out of her proper place. In some sense, she is akin to a fallen angel. She becomes trapped in the material world of suffering.<sup>44</sup>

The Valentinian redemptive story is that of Sophia, who was cast out, being able to rejoin the Pleroma and take up her rightful place when Christ comes down and acts as a mediator for her. Those possessing knowledge (*gnosis*) are her children and, therefore, part of this story includes their escape from the material world. As humans gain this divine knowledge, it destroys a portion of the deficiency separating them and Sophia from the Pleroma and brings everything closer to reintegration. Ireneus describes this ultimate picture of reunification thus: “They [the Valentinians] further hold that the consummation of all things will take place when all that is spiritual has been formed and perfected by Gnosis (knowledge); and by this they mean spiritual men who have attained to the perfect knowledge of God, and been initiated into these mysteries by Achamoth [Wisdom]. And they represent themselves to be these persons.”<sup>45</sup>

This cosmic fall is also echoed in the Valentinian conception of humankind's fall and the entrance of death into the world. Whereas the orthodox Christian view of the fall of humankind and the entrance of sin into the world centers on the events of Genesis 3, the Gospel of Philip emphasizes the separation of Eve from Adam as the key problem that requires a solution. In two instances the Gospel of Philip mentions that death originated from the separation of Adam and Eve. The first excerpt says: “When Eve was still with Adam, death did not exist. When she was separated from him, death came into

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44 *Against Heresies* 1:2:2–3; *Excerpts of Theodotus* 31:3; *Tripartite Tractate* 75:17–77:37. trans. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1987).

45 Ireneus *Against the Heresies* 1.6.1.

being.”<sup>46</sup> Another excerpt reiterates this stance, saying: “If the woman had not separated from the man, she should not die with the man. His separation became the beginning of death.”<sup>47</sup>

The solution to death that the Gospel of Philip then presents is the bridal-chamber, which reunites male and female and so corrects both an earthly and a divine problem. By being in a male/female pair, humans imitate the proper relationship of the Aeons in the Pleroma. It is through this act that a person is made perfect and saved from the perils of the material world. To the Valentinians, the spiritual marriage would reflect an archetypal unity: salvation is equivalent to marriage and marriage is the archetype of salvation. The previously mentioned excerpts not only explain that the separation between Adam and Eve leads to death; they explain that the process can be reversed: “If he [Adam] enters again and attains his former self, death will be no more.”<sup>48</sup> This is further explained in the second excerpt, which blatantly equates the joining of male and female with the saving role of Christ to Sophia:

If the woman had not separated from the man, she should not die with the man. His separation became the beginning of death. Because of this, Christ came to repair the separation, which was from the beginning, and again unite the two, and to give life to those who died as a result of the separation, and unite them. But the woman is united to her husband in the bridal chamber. Indeed, those who have united in the bridal chamber will no longer be separated. Thus Eve separated from Adam because it was not in the bridal chamber that she united with him.<sup>49</sup>

Notice that the woman is the focus of the latter half of the paragraph. It is she who is united in the bridal chamber, and Eve separated from Adam because of the way she initially united with him. This entire salvation narrative actively associates women with

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46 Gos Phil 68:22.

47 Gos Phil 70:9–11.

48 Gos Phil 68:22–24.

49 Gos Phil 70:9.

Sophia and consequently women's need to be saved through marriage to a man. Just as Sophia was separated from the Pleroma, so Eve separated from Adam, bringing death into the world. There might not be a snake involved in the Gnostic description of the fall of humankind and the universe as a whole, but the archetypal woman plays almost the exact same role. Further, every individual woman must be saved by a man through joining with him, just as Sophia is saved by being given a consort.

The issue of women and salvation is further differentiated from the salvation of men in the Gospel of Thomas. Throughout several of the Gnostic Gospels there are two features consistently noted upon regarding women: the first is that Mary (presumably Magdalene, although it is sometimes unclear) is one of Jesus' closest and most trusted disciples and second that she has a somewhat antagonistic relationships with the other disciples, especially Peter. In the Gospel of Thomas there is a short dialogue where Peter protests Mary's presence, saying: “‘Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘See, I am going to attract her to make her male so that she too might become a living spirit that resembles you males. For every female (element) that makes itself male will enter the kingdom of heavens.’”<sup>50</sup> It is unclear as to what is meant by making Mary male, yet intrinsic to both Peter and Jesus' remarks is the fact that woman by themselves cannot have life--that is, salvation. Peter's claim that “‘women are not worthy of life” is not disputed by Jesus. In fact, it's substantiated by his statement. He only differs with Peter in saying that Mary can be made male and *then* will be able to be a “‘living spirit” and “‘enter the kingdom of heaven.” While all people needed *gnosis* in order to attain salvation, women not only needed to be privy to this secret knowledge but

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50 Gos Thom 51:18–24. trans. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1987).

also somehow become men.

Because of the additional step required for salvation, women related not only to men but also to the divine in a different way that arose solely from their female identity. The divine, in turn, also related differently towards women. The Gospel of Thomas includes another saying that demeans the value of femaleness: “Jesus said, ‘When you see one who has not been born of woman, fall upon your faces and prostrate yourselves before that one: it is that one who is your father.’”<sup>51</sup> The procreative ability of women, so vaunted in Greco-Roman religion, is seen as a negative aspect. The highest conception of God to the Gnostics is distinguished by the lack of having a mother.

Indeed, sexual intercourse as a whole is disparaged and considered to be a feminine thing. The Secret Revelation of John describes it thus: “And to the present day sexual intercourse, which originated from the first ruler [the demiurge] has remained. And in the female who belonged to Adam it sowed a seed of desire; and by sexual intercourse it raised up birth in the image of the bodies.”<sup>52</sup> Rather than the first children being a product of Adam and Eve coming together after God declares that “it is not good for the man to be alone,”<sup>53</sup> the first children are brought about through rape of Eve by the evil deity in Gnostic theology. Eve was the one defiled by sexual intercourse first, and so it is through her and other women that more material bodies are created and sexual desire lives on.

This association between sexuality and women is not unique to the Secret

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51 Gos Thom 35:27–30.

52 *Secret Book of John* 24:26–31. trans. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1987). This verse is in reference to the Gnostic conception of the events of the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel were thought to have been conceived not by Adam, but rather by the demiurge who first had sexual intercourse with Eve.

53 Gen 2:18.

Revelation of John. Clement cites *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, which is no longer extant, describing the Gnostic view of birth, which yet again is wholly associated with being both evil and female.

They say that the Savior himself said “I came to destroy the works of the female,” meaning by “female” desire, and by “works” birth and corruption... Their birth is the soul's corruption, since then we are “dead in sins.” And this is the incontinence referred to as “female.” Birth and the corruption chiefly involved in the creation must necessarily continue until the achievement of complete separation and the restoration of the elect, on whose account even the beings mingled with this world are restored to their proper condition.<sup>54</sup>

This saying of Jesus' is a stark contrast to both Matthew 5:17 where Jesus says: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them, but to fulfill them,” and 1 John 3:8 which declares: “The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.” In the first Jesus is destroying nothing and declaring the Law and the Prophets to be good. In the second, the works Jesus came to destroy were those of the devil, whereas the Gnostics have ‘female’ in the devil's place.

The Book of Thomas the Contender also discusses sexual intercourse and desire. It contains a passage listing exhortations against various ways of living, almost an inverse of the beatitudes.

Woe to you who dwell in error without gazing at the light of the sun that judges the entirety and gazes upon the entirety... Woe to you who love the sexual intercourse that belongs to femininity and its foul cohabitation. And woe unto you who are gripped by the authorities of your bodies; for they will afflict you. Woe unto you who are gripped by the agencies of the wicked demons.<sup>55</sup>

As dualists who considered the material world to be evil, it is not surprising that either

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54 Clement *Stromata* 3.9.63. trans. John Ernest Leonard Oulton, 40-92: Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1954.

55 *Book of Thomas the Contender* 144:8-9. trans. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1987).

the act of giving birth or any sort of sexual interaction would be considered negative. Yet sexuality is not characterized as ‘dirty’ or ‘unclean’ in this statement. Rather, the entire descriptor of sexual intercourse revolves around it ‘belonging’ to femininity and “its foul cohabitation.” Femininity fills the same place as “the authorities of your bodies” and “the agencies of wicked demons” in the surrounding verses.

Looking at these examples throughout Gnostic literature, there is a consistent denigration of the female identity. Sophia, while not evil, is the cause of the cosmic fall and progenitor of humanity's existence in a fallen, impure world. If women were to relate to Sophia, it would be at least in part tied in with her negative role and characteristics. Further, in order to attain salvation, women would need to be united with a man somehow, perhaps in addition to needing to become male. The features that differentiated women from men—those associated with procreation—and made up a large part of how a woman likely identified herself in the ancient world, were demonized. Lastly, these negative elements were not primarily mentioned in how women should act in regard to men or in the social sphere generally. Rather, they revolved around how a woman related to the material world around her, her relationship within the larger cosmology, and how salvation was achieved.

### **Women in Christianity**

Christianity grew in primarily the same social environment as the various pagan groups. The women converts would have been familiar with either the pagan or Jewish worldview, and their general social limitations would have been the same as all women of that era, limited by class and gender. Yet Christianity had a fundamentally different view of the divine than the pagan cults, and this in turn changes the way women functioned in

the religion during the first and second centuries. Rather than the many deities who presided over distinct aspects of the world and daily life, Christianity had a single creator God who had power over every aspect of human life, from childbirth to healing, to death and life. This took the gender of both the worshiper and the deity out of the equation. Another important difference was that many of the tasks of the Christian leadership were directed at person-to-person interaction, rather than one person interacting with the deity on behalf of the people, as in both Paganism and Judaism.

This does not mean that Christianity ignored gender in all of its aspects. Certainly there are many places within the New Testament that discuss different roles and actions for men and women. However, these instances pertain to how women should interact and relate to others in the community; in other words, they focus on human to human interaction. There is no real indication in scripture that women related to God in any manifestly different way than men did. The majority of the moral commands pertain to everyone, regardless of gender (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21, Eph 5:3–6). The requirements of faith are the same, not distinguishing gender one way or the other, as the Epistle to the Romans states: “...it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...”<sup>56</sup> (Rom 1:16) and “because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Rom 10:9). There are no separate requirements, rites, confessions, or beliefs of women apart from men.

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<sup>56</sup> Romans 1:16, New Revised Standard Version, used throughout the paper.



The stage of life that a woman is in also does not affect how a woman relates to God in Christianity. Whether women were married, unmarried, or widowed, their interactions with God remained the same (1 Cor 7). There is never a time when women should not be in fellowship or partake of a sacrament due to any female condition. This was a sharp contrast to the relationship of Jewish women to religion, where they were considered *niddah*,<sup>57</sup> or unclean, on a monthly basis because of menstruation. This was no small inconvenience but required a fairly dramatic separation between her and the whole community, as Leviticus demonstrates:

When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. Whoever touches anything upon which she sits shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening; whether it is the bed or anything upon which she sits, when he touches it he shall be unclean until the evening. If any man lies with her, and her impurity falls on him, he shall be unclean seven days; and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean. If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean. Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of her impurity; and everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her impurity...If she is cleansed of her discharge, she shall count seven days, and after that she shall be clean. On the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and bring them to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting. The priest shall offer one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf before the LORD for her unclean discharge. (Lev 15:19–30).

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<sup>57</sup> *Niddah* is a feminine noun used to indicate a woman during menstruation or who has finished menstruating but has not yet been ritually cleansed. The word literally means “moved” or “separated.”

Women were similarly unclean after childbirth (Lev 12: 1–8). This uncleanness limited when they could go into the temple or be involved with religious activities, and as can be seen above, could require special offerings. However, there are no such restrictions on women in the New Testament or early Church. No remark is made concerning menstruation or childbirth affecting what a Christian woman may or may not do. This was a huge change in the relationship between women and worship and between women and God. No longer were the natural, healthy biological characteristics of women the cause of social or spiritual segregation and, in essence, sinfulness.

In sum, women's reasons for coming to God or their relationship to any of the major doctrines of Christianity are never considered different from men in the New Testament texts. Paul explained in Romans: "...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith..." (Rom 3:22–25). Additionally, there is Gal 3:28, which proclaims that: "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Considerable debate regarding the interpretation of this verse has occurred, especially given the household codes giving men the headship of the family in several other places (Eph 5:22–6:5, Col 3:18–4:1, Titus 2:1–10, 1 Peter 2:13–3:9).<sup>58</sup> Krister Stendahl points out, however, that while this statement: "is limited to what happens in Christ through baptism...in Christ the

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<sup>58</sup> Karen Torjensen also points out that these codes also corresponded with the social roles of Greco-Roman culture, and so allowed for far greater assimilation and acceptance of Christianity within those cultures, in *When Women were Priests*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 38.

dichotomy *is* overcome through baptism...”<sup>59</sup> Thus, the primary identity was not of a woman, but of a human, and her relationship with God is based on that identity rather than her femaleness.

This egalitarianism is also demonstrated in Church history. What is known about Christian women in leadership is a bit more limited, as some women are named, but not many details are given. Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza argues that the Jesus Movement was inclusive of women's leadership, although once again, what correlates to leadership as opposed to discipleship within the Gospel narratives is a bit murky.<sup>60</sup> What is apparent is that there were female disciples of Christ during his lifetime, and they played vital positive roles within the gospel narrative. These roles are further remarkable because they are not strictly women's roles.

Luke 8:1–3 records that: “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.” These women were doing just as Christ and the male disciples were doing: going out, away from their homes and spreading Christ's message. They are not being confined to their houses or standard communities. They are going out, presumably, among strangers. There are also ‘many’ women doing this, along with the three women who are named. While an exact number is impossible to suggest, it is reasonable that the

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59 Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 33.

60 Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 130.

number of women in total was close to or greater than the number of men (thirteen, with Jesus and his twelve disciples). Additionally, the women were financially backing this venture, being essentially patrons. In this passage, women are heavily involved in all aspects of Jesus' ministry, including ways that would have been unusual at that time.

Women disciples were also at Jesus' crucifixion, a detail mentioned in all four gospels (Mt 27:55–56, Mk 14:40–41, Lk 23:49, and Jn 23:25). Some women are explicitly mentioned by name, unlike most of the twelve disciples. They also watched Jesus' burial (Mt 27:61; Mk 15:47; Lk 23:55). And, quite significantly, women are the first to witness Christ's resurrection (Mt 28:1–10; Mk 16:9; Lk 24:1–11, Jn 20:1–8). It is the women who are given the task of telling the disciples of Jesus' resurrection, the pivotal act in Christian theology. In the longer ending of Mark as well as in Luke, the disciples do not believe the women at first, possibly because they are women; yet these were the first messengers Jesus chose.<sup>61</sup>

After the time of Jesus, leadership roles became more concrete, some involving women. As with paganism, there was a lot of variance depending on geographic location, especially as Christianity did not spring up fully-formed with a set hierarchy.<sup>62</sup> There is evidence that women did hold a number of titled positions in early Christianity, and it seems that there was great variance on the acceptance of this practice depending on location. There are, of course, the deaconesses mentioned by Pliny the Younger in Bithynia.<sup>63</sup> In some locations there is strong evidence for female priests and other titled roles. In Rome there is a mosaic with a woman labeled “Theodora Episcopa,” which

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61 Mark 16: 11, Luke 24:11.

62 Torjesen, 5.

63 Pliny *Epistulae* X.96.

might be translated “Bishop Theodora” with obviously feminine endings, although on the mosaic itself the ending ‘a’ has been defaced. It is not known how long ago such defacement occurred, quite possibly in ancient times.<sup>64</sup> Obviously, this was an issue that likely was or certainly became contentious.

As time went on, regardless of location, women's ordination to high office ceased, with the circulation of the book of 1 Timothy and the direction that “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man” (1 Tim 2:12).<sup>65</sup> In later centuries, the practice of female ordination was roundly condemned and stamped out, if it had ever been mainstream to begin with. Yet the prohibition of women holding office rests entirely on the interactions between men and women and not between women and God. A woman's position or relationship to God is not changed or limited, whereas it can certainly be argued that her position in relationship to men was directed by her identity as a woman. While this may have been a societal blow for women in this time, spiritually those in leadership positions were not more favored by God or given any special dispensation. James 3:1 specifically warns that: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” This is similar to Christ's own warning that those who lead others astray are better off being thrown into the sea with a millstone tied about their necks.<sup>66</sup> This is not to argue that women were better off not being in leadership positions, but rather that it did not affect their spiritual status in regards to God.

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64 Dorothy Irvin, “The Ministry of Women in the Early Church: the Archeological Evidence,” *Duke Divinity School Review*, no 2 (1980), 76.

65 The latest date Timothy could have been written is CE 130–155 according to Berding, “Polycarp of Smyrna's View of the Authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 53.4 (1999): 349–360. Polycarp seems to have been familiar with Timothy by the time of his writing *Letter to the Philippians* in CE 110–130.

66 Luke 17:2, Matt 18:6.

However, two titled offices remained for women to participate in: Deaconess and Widow. Both were female offices of necessity, in that there was no inherent benefit to being one or the other, but rather were positions that were socially needed. In the largely gender-segregated world of the ancient Mediterranean, the Deaconess was needed to maintain propriety with other women. The *Didascalia*, a 3rd century treatise on Church orders, described the rationale for Deaconesses thus:

...but a woman for the ministry of women. For there are homes to which you cannot send a male deacon to their women, on account of the heathen, but you may send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required. In the first place, when women go down into the [baptismal] water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen [naked] by men.<sup>67</sup>

The sacrament of Baptism was no different for men or women; the only concern was that modesty be preserved.

Likewise, widows needed support from the church. Under specific circumstances they were not just given support but considered “ecclesiastical widows” who prayed for the church, as demonstrated by another document on church orders, the *Apostolic Tradition*:

When a widow is appointed, she is not ordained, but is chosen by name. If her husband has been dead a long time, she is appointed. If it has not been a long time since her husband died, she may not be trusted. If, however, she is old, let her be tested for a time. For often the passions grow old with those who give them a place in themselves. The widow is appointed by word alone, and then may join the rest of the widows. Do not lay hands upon her, for she does not offer the oblation, nor does she have a liturgical duty. Ordination is for the clergy because of liturgical duty. The widow is appointed because of prayer, which is a duty for all.<sup>68</sup>

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67 *Didascalia* III, 12, 1–4. Trans. R. Hugh Connolly, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929).

68 *Apostolic Tradition*, 10. Trans. Burton Scott Easton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1934).

In both cases, it was necessary for women to be in these positions because of external circumstances and culture, not because it altered their relationship with God. Unlike pagan positions such as the Flaminica Dialis or Vestal Virgins, women did not need to fulfill these roles in order to please a deity. There was not a need for widows in Christianity, but rather, because there were widows, a place in the church structure was made for them.

However, the untitled positions that women filled in the Early Church especially demonstrate the egalitarian nature of action in the church. Acts 16 tells the story of Lydia, a God-worshiper<sup>69</sup> before being converted to Christianity by Paul and Silas. Her whole household is baptized with her at her conversion, indicating that she had great influence. After their release from prison, Paul and Silas go to see her and stay at her house for some time afterward. The lack of any man being mentioned in conjunction with Lydia suggests that she might have been a widow or unmarried, but that is speculation.<sup>70</sup> It is, however, indicative of her position as a community leader and the focal point of the new Christian community within Philippi.<sup>71</sup> Here the leadership exhibited is in spite of the fact that Lydia is a woman, not because of that fact. She had the means to host Paul and Silas and so she did.

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The document was traditionally attributed to Hippolytus, and has been dated from the 2nd to the 4th centuries. The order of widows is contrasted to Deaconesses, who were ordained. Also, see 1 Timothy 5:9–11.

69 This would indicate a Gentile who worshiped God, but had not yet become a proselyte in Judaism. John Cumming, *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 25.

70 Richard S. Ascough, *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2009), 7, 32.

71 See Acts 16:40, where it indicates that the Christians of Philippi congregated at Lydia's house to say goodbye to Paul and Silas.

In Romans, Paul lists many women and couples who he recognizes as important members of the church:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a [διάκονον]<sup>72</sup> Of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house...Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was...Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa...Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. (Rom 16: 1–15)

In this passage, it can be seen that Paul praised men and women regardless of gender, and the tasks that both did were not particularly masculine or feminine. Phoebe was traveling and could expect the church in Rome to host her and be of assistance to her. Priscilla and Aquila were a Christian couple who, like Paul, acted as missionaries and instructed others in the faith.<sup>73</sup> Junia was dedicated enough to go to prison for her beliefs and actions. Paul also mentions other women are in various other letters, such as Euodia and Syntyche “for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers” (Phil 4:3). These are jobs done by men and women regardless of gender.

In every important aspect of the Early Church, women worked actively alongside men, as missionaries, hosts, and patrons. Clement of Alexandria, writing in the early third

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72 The word used in Rom 16:1 is διάκονον, which is used 29 times throughout the New Testament. Nineteen of those times it is generally translated as ‘servant’, seven times as ‘minister,’ and three times as ‘deacon.’ While it can be argued that the office of deacon is being used here, it is perhaps more likely that it is being used in the general sense like the majority of the appearances of the word are. Further, even men who are described as διάκονον generally do not have the title ‘deacon’ applied to them. In 1Tim 4:6, Timothy is described as a διάκονον but it is most often translated ‘servant’ and occasionally ‘minister.’ There is a similar occurrence in Col 1:7 with Epaphras.

73 See Acts 18:26.



century, relates that:

...in accordance with their [Paul and other missionaries'] particular ministry, devoted themselves to preaching without any distraction, and took their wives with them not as women with whom they had marriage relations, but as sisters, that they might be their fellow-ministers in dealing with housewives. It was through them that the Lord's teaching penetrated also the women's quarters without any scandal being aroused. We also know the directions about women deacons which are given by the noble Paul in his second letter to Timothy.<sup>74</sup>

This demonstrates that the conception was that these were women acting alongside men and were being thought of primarily as fellow-workers for Christ. In other words, their primary identity was not that of being a woman, but of being a Christian.

In Christianity, the roles and duties of a believer had less to do with gender issues and were more egalitarian in scope: for example a patron or host of a house church did not center on specific masculine or feminine duties or traits. Christianity certainly recognized the differences between men and women, and the gender-segregation of the time made it necessary for specifically feminine roles such as deaconess, but the actual rituals involved did not hinge upon a female identity. Instead, self-identity as a Christian came first, and then considerations as women followed.

### **Conclusion**

It is not surprising that Gnosticism and Greco-Roman paganism have gender-identity as a determining factor in the relationship between the divine and women. As mentioned previously, gender-identity would be one of the most obvious and enduring facets of identity in the ancient world. Christianity's ability, at least at first, to distinguish between social gender roles and role of human relations with God was remarkable, if unfortunately short-lived. It is no wonder that Christianity had an appeal with women, but

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<sup>74</sup> Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 3.6.53.

at the same time converts were not limited to women as in other Oriental cults.

The difference between women and paganism and women and Christianity is probably in large part due to the very distinct views of divinity in paganism and Christianity. Instead of many deities embodied as larger-than-life males and females, Christianity had one God who was only rarely anthropomorphized. Whereas the pagan festivals tended to commemorate reoccurring instances in life (puberty, seasons, etc) Christianity's focus was on salvation from personal sins and a hope of the life to come. Ultimately what this meant was that, when women were involved, there was not a focus on women being women in relation to God, but rather on an individual being a Christian in relation to God and the world. Paganism, on the other hand, was focused on every day living or the material considerations of home, family, and state. Deities related to people based on those categories and the individual's place within those categories. In this way, a woman's social identity determined her relationship with the divine.

Like Christianity, Gnosticism focused on a wider salvific narrative. Yet masculine and feminine identities were intrinsically tied into this narrative. While there was certainly identity as a Gnostic or a true Christian with the correct, hidden knowledge, for women that identity was not enough. Being women not only affected the deportment in the material world, but also their role in partaking in salvation. While, unlike Christianity, Gnosticism does emphasize feminine aspects of the divine, the source texts reflect patriarchal, if not actively misogynistic, views of women as unclean and not deserving of life. While viewing the material world negatively, Gnosticism seems to apply material concepts of sex and gender to its conception of the spiritual, resulting in very definite sexual roles that were intrinsically tied to gender.

Despite the quite distinct cosmologies and foci of paganism and Gnosticism, women in each religion would have related to the divine primarily as women. Their gender identities would have shaped how they acted religiously and their conceptions of themselves spiritually. In paganism this was rooted in the material reality of being female, whereas Gnosticism carried the idea of female identity into the spiritual realm, yet both had a significant effect on women and religion. Christianity's broader focus on the human condition, regardless of age, gender, or social standing, stands in striking contrast to both these religions.

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