

financial, and political patronage. Though excluded from elective office, they were able to influence politics in many direct and indirect ways.¹⁹

Under the influence of interpretations of Mediterranean anthropological studies brought into biblical scholarship, students of early Christianity are now accustomed to thinking of ancient Mediterranean societies as honor-shame cultures, in which women embody family honor, sensitivity to honor, and the possibility of shame in their conduct. In this view, women are potentially dangerous to their families as those who can easily bring shame by sexual conduct inappropriate to their state of life.

One can see this, for example, in the way the second-century BCE scribe Ben Sira frets over the troubles that a daughter brings (Sir 42:9-14). He loses sleep over worrying whether he will be able to get her a good marriage, whether she will be seduced beforehand, whether she will please her husband, and whether she will bear children. Her father is to keep careful guard over her while she is in his house to be sure there is no secret way into her room. She should not spend time with married women. He concludes that it is a woman who brings shame into the house.

This pessimistic meditation reflects a pattern that in its larger lines is generally accurate, yet it must be nuanced by consideration of other factors that contribute to the social dynamic: the way in which the kinship and hierarchy structures work in any given situation. Crucial here is the degree of women's economic control of resources, for where women have greater economic power, they also have greater social power. Another mitigating factor is the ability to form social networks. Where women live in close proximity to each other and have the social mechanism in place for quick and trustworthy communication, they have wide unofficial power to determine the direction of life in their families and communities.

Some Mediterranean societies were probably in fact more matrifocal and functionally (though not theoretically) egalitarian than we suspect. When a woman's name occurs before that of her husband, it is usually because she is of higher social status than he.²⁰ The task here is the attempt to read between the lines of public theory, whether that be Roman law or the New Testament household codes, to ascertain how life was really lived.

The idea can be found among male writers all over the Mediterranean world that the public forum and the world of politics is male, whereas the house and the indoor life belong to women. Select passages from authors like Philo are often quoted to suggest that the women of these cultures were kept as secluded as possible. This was manifestly not the case in much of the

¹⁹ See, for example, Richard A Bauman (1992), *Women in politics in ancient Rome*; Suzanne Dixon (1988), *The Roman mother*; (2001), *Reading Roman women*.

²⁰ Flory, Maureen Boudreau (1983/84), "Where women precede men: Factors influencing the order of names in Roman epitaphs".

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Mediterranean world. First of all, where such a (male) ideal existed, it was an elite picture of the family for those who had the luxury to keep (freeborn, elite) women indoors. Lower-class families could not do it. We can be sure that in spite of public ideology of the all-male forum, slave and lower-class women were there in abundance, conducting business and shopping in the market. Even classical Athens, where the ideology of seclusion appears most clearly, was not so decidedly segregated by gender in public. By the first century CE Roman women were running businesses, exercising patronage, attending public dinners, and administering their own property, in spite of formal ideology that continued to deny to them what they were actually doing. Some nonelite examples are: Julia Felix, who operated a large rental entertainment complex at Pompeii; Naevoleia Tyche, wealthy patron at Pompeii; among believers in Jesus, Lydia at Philippi (Ac 16) and Phoebe at Cenchrae (Rm 16:1-2).

5.4 Children

Children of a Roman citizen father and a free mother normally became citizens. In the case of noncitizen parents, the child usually took the status of the mother. Differences of legal status had severe effects on inheritance laws. A slave freed by a citizen in the correct way before a magistrate or by will normally received citizenship. From the *Lex Aelia Sentia* in 4 CE to Justinian in 531, informal manumission of slaves *inter amicos* or “among friends,” or of a slave under thirty except of a female slave for marriage, inserted the newly freed slave into the category of Junian Latin, with freedom but not citizenship and no right to make a will. Their marriage was legal, *iustum conubium*, their children free, but unable to inherit. These restrictions often led persons to pretend to higher status than they actually possessed. There are, for instance, legal discussions about women marrying men they thought were free but turned out to be slaves. Apparently the law did not intervene unless someone who stood to suffer from the situation pressed charges. Given the widespread custom of manumitting slaves in midlife, this must have meant great numbers of children who suffered, being freeborn but with no right of inheritance from their parents.²¹ This would have affected Christians as well who had been slaves of Roman citizens, and their children.

Childhood was short. Children of slaves and poorer free families joined in the labor force as soon as they were able. Wealthier and upper-class children were sent to school or privately tutored on a rigorous schedule. The prevailing attitude toward children was that they were inherently resistant to civilizing, so harsh discipline was imposed to make them conform to societal expectations. The available evidence indicates that lower-class children

²¹ Jane Gardner (1999), “Legal stumbling-blocks for lower-class families in Rome”; Paul Weaver (1999), “Children of Junian Latins”.

married later than upper-class children, probably because the labor of the former was needed as long as possible, while in the case of the latter, the sooner an advantageous marriage match could be made, the better. Generally first marriages were arranged by families with the best interests of both children and their families in view. Girls were as much as ten years younger than their future husbands, sometimes more in elite situations where politics were involved. But the age disparity created many widows – one reason for the frequent mention of widows in the social-care literature of early Christianity. In second and further marriages, women seem to have exercised more choice, with husbands closer to their own age.

The Roman ideal of the once-married woman, the *univira*, did not hinder the practice of multiple marriages. Beginning already with 1 Cor 7 and 1 Tm 3:2, 12, we see Christian sources disparaging second marriages, which then placed on the community the burden of support of poorer widows who followed church leaders' advice.

The meeting of the Christian house church consisted of people like those described above. In some cases, a household was large enough and there were sufficient church members to constitute an *ekklesia* composed entirely of household members. This seems to be what is envisioned in the household of Cornelius at Caesarea (Ac 10) or that of the jailer in Philippi (Ac 16). But these are idealized narratives. The more complicated reality is reflected in the letters of Paul, where there are marriages between believers and others, and there are believing slaves in non-believing households and vice versa. In spite of the patriarchal ideology of the dominance of a male head of household, as given in Hellenistic and Roman treatises on marriage and in the household codes of the Pauline letters derived from them, the real-time discussions of family life tell a different story.

6. AN ACTUAL EARLY CHRISTIAN FAMILY

Into this complex and difficult world the challenge of the Jesus movement came. How it was received and how believers adapted what they already knew and were living to what they were now learning is revealed in glimpses of their writings. We have some information about the family life of one particular Christian social unit in early second-century Rome: that of Hermas as revealed in the biographical details of his narrative of the *Shepherd*.²² Hermas was raised as a *threptos*, an abandoned baby picked up and raised by someone else, probably as in most cases in slavery. At some point he was manumitted, after having been sold at least once. How and when he came

²² Carolyn Osiek (1999), *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Some have doubted the historicity of these family details, which is irrelevant for these purposes. Whether historical or not, the story of the family is typical of its family's social location.

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into the Christian community is not known. At the time of writing, he is a freedman householder with an *oikos*, that is, a familial establishment, probably a modest *domus* of the kind to be seen at Pompeii or Herculaneum. Nothing is said of slave ownership, but probably slaves are present in the household. He has a wife and children, and they do appear briefly in the narrative.

Hermas is engaged in various financial ventures, and his household seems to be a rather typical Roman family of humble status but comfortable means. His wife, never named, is criticized for having too loose a tongue, a typical misogynist complaint. His children may in fact be adult children, still under his *potestas*, who have been behaving irresponsibly, disrespectful of his parental authority. Details are not given, except to say that they have acted lawlessly, and that Hermas, because of his affection for them, has not exercised appropriate discipline. A Roman citizen householder of any rank had legal power over all in his *familia*, even adult sons and daughters. He was expected to act with authority to control them. If his children were indeed adults, it would determine Hermas's age to be rather advanced as the survival norms went. Hermas is the one upon whom the blame falls for the misbehavior of both wife and children; as paternal authority, he is legally and socially responsible for the conduct of everyone under his power. Hermas is not a leader but a member of a Christian community (*Vision* 1.2-3). When, however, he receives his special revelation, he is instructed to read it "with the presbyters (or elders) who preside over the church" (*Vision* 2.4.3).

These details about the family life of Hermas are woven into the revelatory narrative of the text in such a way that it is difficult to extract them.

All is not well in either household or church of Hermas. This is perhaps a mirror of what family life in the early church was like, caught, as it always is, between ideal and reality.

7. PRO-FAMILY PROPAGANDA

Followers of the Jesus movement reading their own literature in the last decades of the first century CE must have thought they were receiving a confusing message. On the one hand, the household codes of Colossians and Ephesians and the domestic policies of the Pastoral Epistles and 1 Peter reinforced the family values of domestic order in a hierarchical universe (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:8; 1 Tm 2:8-15; 5:11-16; 6:1-2; Tt 2:2-10; 1 Pt 2:18-3:7). As reflected in treatises on household management that had been in vogue since Aristotle, the authority of husband, father, and male slave owner is confirmed, though not without differences. However little emphasized, there is

an articulated ideal of mutual submission (Eph 5:21).²³ The role description for the dominant male is one of benevolence, not merely out of enlightened self-interest but because of his identity in Christ along with that of all involved. He is to love his wife, not provoke his children, and treat his slaves fairly, remembering that he too has a master in heaven.²⁴

There are other differences as well. The subordinate members of the household – wives, children, and slaves – also have a significant role to play. They are addressed and addressed first, as persons in their own right endowed with dignity. Wives become the image of the church (Eph 5:2-24), slaves of the suffering Christ (1 Pt 2:21-24). Through these passages, believers in Jesus must have gotten the same message as was communicated in civic politics and official religion: the well-run household is the foundation of society, and well-run means maintaining the hierarchical structure that had always been the philosophical and political ideal.²⁵

Throughout all this domestic propaganda, the idealization of the structures does not change, whatever the reality. Marriage remains ideally the hierarchical relationship of benevolent monarch to his loving and submissive wife. The obedience of adult children owed by law to their paternal head is not

²³ **Ephesians 5:21-33**

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

²⁴ For discussion of the literary genre and social function of the household codes, see David L. Balch (1988), “Household codes”.

²⁵ **Ephesians 6**

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother – this is the first commandment with a promise: so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.

And fathers, do not provoke *your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with great fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves.

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compromised. Most important, the structures of slavery remain in place. In spite of Paul's Letter to Philemon, the practice of slavery continues, even if there is strong teaching that slaves are not to be mistreated. Certainly followers of Jesus were not in a political or social position to abrogate slavery, but they could have freed their own slaves. There is ample evidence that they did not. Slaves and freedmen/women continue to be incorporated into the family structure as always. They are to continue to serve wholeheartedly, not taking it upon themselves to think more of themselves or less of their masters since both are members of the assembly, but to treat their masters as they would the Lord (Eph 6:5-8; Tt 6:1-2). They are to continue to be answerable with their bodies (1 Pt 2:24). Being slave or free is proclaimed as a matter of indifference, though the opportunity for freedom is to be taken if available (Gl 3:27-28; 1 Cor 7: 21-24). Slaves should not expect that funds from the assembly will be appropriated to purchase their freedom – although that must have been done in some cases, or there would have been no such expectation (Ignatius, *To Polycarp* 4.3). On the other hand, some take the heroic measure of selling themselves into slavery to ransom others or to secure food for the hungry (*1 Clement* 55.2).

8. THE FAMILIAL COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

While from some of their own writings the first generations of believers in Jesus were receiving a message of domestic harmony as fulfillment of the will of God, a different message, standing in some tension with the former, was coming through from another part of their tradition. The Synoptic Gospels and some of their sources conveyed the hard message of the cost of discipleship. Part of that message was the preferment of discipleship over family ties, of community cohesion over family integrity. In case of conflict, the newly constituted community was to take precedence. The tone is struck early in Mark (not the most popular early Gospel, but one surely circulating by the 80s of the first century) when Jesus' family come to take him home from his more and more popular ministry in Capernaum because they thought he was out of his mind (Mk 3:21).²⁶ Jesus retaliates at 3:31-35 by rejecting their visit and declaring that the disciples around him are family to him. No one from Jesus' family appears again in Mark's Gospel. Matthew and Luke pick up the same story, which Luke softens considerably (Mt 12:46-50; Lk 8:19-21).

The Q tradition heightens the tension by having Jesus declare that one inevitable result of his preaching, in the words of Micah 7:6, is that family members will be set against each other, son against father, daughter against

²⁶ Some translations here say that it is other people, not the family, who think Jesus is out of his mind. But the Greek has an indefinite "they" and the nearest previous antecedent is οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ, those around Jesus.

mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law, making one's enemies those of one's own household (Mt 10:34-35; Lk 12:51-53). Matthew goes on to say (and Luke echoes in a less determined way) that anyone who loves a family member, father, mother, son, or daughter more than Jesus is not worthy of him (Mt 10:37; Lk 14:26). Discipleship takes precedence over all family ties, even the solemn obligation of a son to bury his father (Mt 8:22; Lk 9:60). Luke softens the impact of the story of Jesus' preference for disciples over family (Lk 8:19-21), rehabilitates the mother of Jesus as prophet in the infancy narrative (Lk 1:46-55), makes John the Baptist into a relative, and suggests continuity with the family by the presence of the mother of Jesus at Pentecost and James, the brother of the Lord, as ongoing leader in the Jerusalem community. Matthew and Mark do not engage in such reconciliation. Even the Gospel of John, which does not reflect this tension about family, remarks that "even his brothers [that is, family] did not believe in him" (Jn 7:5), although he was moving about with them in Galilee.

These and sayings like them must have created confusion among families in the late first century that included a large number of followers of Jesus. It is interesting that no positive sayings about the goodness of family life were preserved and attributed to Jesus. In one sense, we could say that the strong position attributed to him with regard to prohibition of divorce (especially the extended discussion in Mk 10:2-12; Mt 19:1-9) was in fact a counterpoint affirmation of the marriage bond as core of the family and household. But these passages hardly offset the impact of others that foretell disruption, and it is noticeable that none of those passages (discussed above) speak of separation of husband and wife. Given what we know about kinship structures in antiquity and in traditional societies, especially the leading role played by parents in the arrangement of marriages and the close ties among siblings, it is unlikely that they would have said that the core of family life resided in the nuclear family (for which, by the way, they had no name). Rather, it is disruption of parent-child and sibling relationships that would have seemed more severe.

The point here is not to assess whatever historicity there may be in this Gospel tradition that relativizes family ties, though such a difficult thematic undoubtedly originated with Jesus. The point is that when the "memoirs of the apostles," as Justin calls them, were read at worship, these sayings must have been part of the readings, counteracting to some extent the domestic agenda of the Epistles cited above.

It is not a case of elite versus nonelite ideals: both visions, in fact, could be understood as elite ideals that influenced other social levels. The long tradition of structured household management based on hierarchy and submission certainly came from elite circles. At the same time, the radical philosophical teachings of some schools advocated a rupture with family ties

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similar to that attributed to Jesus, to enable the philosopher to transcend the pulls of family loyalty and transfer that loyalty to a new circle of like-minded people. The ideal of the hierarchical family certainly was reinforced by elites and was perhaps more difficult to maintain in other situations with more poverty and less education. But there is no reason to assume that lower-class families were any less devoted to each other and to preserving family unity. The lack of leisure and need for everyone to be involved in family business and labor among the lower classes may well have contributed, however, to less patriarchal and more egalitarian structures, not so much so that everyone had the same rights, as that everyone had the same obligation to join in the common labor.

The power of the family over its members could not have remained absolute through this process of competing tensions. It was relativized in favor of discipleship, the new absolute loyalty to the death. Thus, while family ties were to be respected and even strengthened when possible, they were always to be seen as secondary to the formation of a new family of believers, where old men were to be revered as one's new fathers, old women as mothers, younger men as brothers, younger women as sisters (1 Tm 5:1-2). The family ideal was not abandoned, but it was significantly altered by creating a new substitute family to whom the same loyalty was owed.

Nor did the tension with the natal family end with the New Testament. As different understandings proliferated in early Christianity, readers began to encounter slightly later and considerably more romanticized versions of apostolic adventures in what we now know as the Apocryphal Acts. Here great apostolic figures like Peter, Paul, John, and Thomas set out on their own adventurous journeys, confronting evil and conquering it. Despite some differences of theology, all of these early Christian romances have one thing in common: they all advocate celibacy as the only way of Christian existence, even if it means the breakup of marriages and espousals to accomplish it. A major difference from the Synoptic Gospels is that these stories focus on women, notably women of the upper classes. The stories in these works are full of women of leading families in their city who abandon husbands and fiancés in favor of an ascetic lifestyle in imitation and companionship with the apostle. By doing this, these tales continued the deep suspicion of the claims of the natal family and contributed to its relativization in Christian circles. The upper-class values of domestic harmony under firm male control were now under direct attack in these depictions.²⁷

²⁷ Andrew S Jacobs (1999), "A family affair: Marriage, class, and ethics in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles".



Fig 6 Inhumation and incineration burials of the poor, first - third centuries CE at Isola Sacra, the cemetery of Portus, port of Rome. While wealthier people chose family mausolea (visible in background), these represent those of more modest means, who could yet afford a decent burial rather than deposition in the common pits with the poorest people. Photo taken in 1973: these burial are no longer in place.
Photo: Carolyn Osiek

This tension between the traditional patriarchal family and the radical denial of family claims on the believer was to continue throughout early Christianity not only through official teachings but also in the cult of martyrdom and the ascetic life. In both cases, the person who resisted the claims of family with its earthly obligations in favor of renunciation of a normal family life and the embrace of death or a prolonged life of asceticism conformed to the type of heroic sanctity approved of by the same church that continued to preach the hierarchical authority of the family. The vast majority of early Christians were neither martyrs nor ascetics. They lived lives of quiet virtue and vice. As always with the silent majority, their stories go mostly untold.

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