

WOMAN

VOLUME III

WOMEN OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

BY

Rev. ALFRED BRITTAIN and MITCHELL CARROLL, Ph.D.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
J. CULLEN AYER, Jr., Ph.D.
OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY

[Illustration 1: SEEKING SHELTER After the painting
by Luc
Oliver Merson

Notwithstanding all that is said in these ancient
writings in
the attempt to do her honor, we must conclude that the
glory of
the halo which beautifies the head of the real Mary is
derived
by reflection from the moral splendor of her Son....
We need
such a poetic creation as Mary; and her place at the
head of all
the daughters of earth is the more secure and
effective because
her figure in authentic history is but a shadowy
outline. The
ideal woman whom all mankind loves and reverences as
Virgin,
Mother, and Saint, is objectified by concentrating in
Mary of
Nazareth all possible feminine grace, beauty, and
purity.]

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In all ages and in all countries

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ILLUSTRATED

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN the historian has described the rise and fall of
empires and

dynasties, and has recounted with care and exactness the details of the great political movements that have changed the map of continents, there remains the question: What was the cause of these revolutions in human society--what were the real motives that were operative in the hearts and minds of the persons in the great drama of history that has been displayed? The mere chain of events as they have passed before the eye as it surveys the centuries does not give an explanation of itself. There must be a cause that lies behind these events, and of which they are but the effects. This cause, the true cause of history, lies in the minds and hearts of the men and nations. The student of the past is coming more and more to see that the only hope of making history a science, and not a mere chronicle, is to be found in the clear ascertainment and study of those psychological conditions which have made actions what they were. Foremost among those conditions have been the hopes, aspirations and ideals of men and women. These have been the greatest motive forces in the history of the world. These, quite as much as merely selfish considerations, have guided the conduct of the men who have made history, not merely those who have been leaders in the great movements of society, but the multitude of followers who have not attracted the attention of historians, but have, nevertheless, given the strength and force to the revolutions of the world.

The deepest interest in the history of Christian women lies in the way in which woman's status in society has been modified by

the new religion. The chronicle of saintly life and deeds is a part of that history. But there are, also, women who have signally failed to attain those virtues for which their religion called. These, too, have their place, for both have either forwarded or retarded the realization of woman's place in society. Often the heathen spirit is but half concealed under the mask of Christianity. But the whole tone of society has been changed, nevertheless, by the ideas and ideals which that religion brought before men's minds in a new and vivid manner.

The position of woman has been more influenced by Christianity than by any other religion. This is not because there have not been noble sentiments expressed by non-Christian writers; for among the rabbinical writers, for instance, are many fine sentiments that could have come only from men who clearly perceived the place of woman in an ideal human society. Nor because in Christianity there have not been men whose conception of woman was more suitable to the adherents of those faiths that have regarded her as a thing unclean. But from the very nature of the appeal which Christianity has made to the world, the place of woman in society has been changed. The new faith appealed to all mankind in the name of the humanity which the Son of God had assumed, and consequently it was forced to treat men and women as on a spiritual equality. It was forced by the natural desire for consistency to break down any barriers that might keep one-half of the human race from the

full realization of the possibilities of their natures, which were made in the image of God. It is in this relation of Christianity to the world, quite as much as in the sayings and precepts of its Founder and his Apostles, that has been found the ground for the great work of Christianity in raising the position of women in the world.

Christianity should in this respect be compared with the other religions that have attained prominence. Among those that were national religions, there has been no appeal to the world in general. They were bound up with the race, and their adherents were those of the race or nation in which they were to be found. Such religions have made no appeal to the individual. They had no propaganda. They did not extend to other nations. They were essentially national. In them there was no place for women. The father of the household represented his family, and although women had certain duties in connection with the household worship, it was only because they were under the power of some men. This is true of the religions of India, China, and the ancient religions of the Semitic race. In two of the great world-religions, those centring on Mahomet and Buddha, there has been no place for women as such. These religions are primarily the religion of men. But in the case of Christianity, the appeal has been to every human being, merely because of the human element. If there were to be no distinction on account of race or social condition, still less was there on account of sex. Male and female were

alike in Christ. The Christian must be a believer for himself--the faith of no one else could serve for him. Marriage made no difference in the religious position of anyone. Such sentiments applied day after day in the course of the world's life could not remain without their effect, and the change wrought by them has been profound and lasting.

That there has not yet been the full realization of the ideal of Christianity in the matter of the position of woman in society is no stranger than the non-realization of the ideals of that or any other faith. The eternal ideas of right are sometimes extremely slow in their operation. The forces they have to overcome are strongly entrenched. But slow as may seem the progress, the power of right steadily gains and the temporary success of evil is soon past. The ways in which the triumph of the Christian ideal has been brought nearer have been at times very varied. At one time it may seem that the leaders in the cause of social regeneration have been wholly blind to the full significance of the faith they professed. Fantastic forms of asceticism have banished women from the society of those who were trying to lead the perfect life. But the more sympathetic study of the extravagances of religious enthusiasm has been able to discover that even in ages in which ideals seemed to be wholly opposed to those of latter ages, there has been the same fundamental conception which has been constantly striving for realization in the world.

In the light of subsequent history, it appears fortunate that the position of woman in the new society was not more fully and carefully defined by the teachers of the new religion. If the early Christian teachers had given their followers minute rules regulating their life and conduct, there might easily have been a return to a legalism that would have been disastrous for the new faith. Even the few regulations that are to be found in connection with matters of order and discipline in the Apostolic Church, so far as they have concerned women, have been frequently misunderstood and misapplied. They have been made of lasting obligation by many, rather than considered as the expression for the times and circumstances in which the early Church was placed, of principles of propriety which might be very different from, if not indeed contrary to, the sentiments of another age. But by leaving the whole question open, with but a very few exceptions, the great working out of the freedom of the new faith was possible. Woman has been recognized by the world as man's helpmate. She is not his toy or his slave, but a sharer with him in the highest privileges of human nature. An appreciation of the tremendous responsibilities that have been put upon her by the fact of her womanhood has not separated her from man, but both are seen standing side by side in the New Kingdom.

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PREFACE

Christianity introduced a new moral epoch in the course of human history. Its effect was necessarily transforming upon those who came under its sway. Being cosmopolitan in its nature, we have now to study woman as being somewhat dissociated from racial type and national manner, and we shall seek to ascertain how she met and was modified by Christian conditions. These had a larger effect upon her life than upon that of man; for, by its nature, Christianity gave an opening for the higher possibilities of her being of which the old religions took little account. In the realm of the spiritual, it, for the first time, assented to her equality with man. That the women of the first Christian centuries submitted themselves to the influence of that religion in a varying degree, the following pages will abundantly show. And it will be seen that in the many instances where the Christian doctrine was not permitted to dominate the life, the dissimilarity of those women from their prototypes in former heathendom is correspondingly lessened. While it is not possible to treat this subject without illustrating the above-mentioned fact, the authors beg to remind the reader that this is distinctively a historical and not a religious work. Though, under other circumstances, they would be very willing to state positive views in regard to many questions herein suggested, it is not

within the province
of this book to defend or refute any religious
institution. The aim is
solely and impartially to represent the life of the
Christian women of
the first ages.

Though this is a work of collaboration, Mr. Brittain is
solely
responsible for the part of the book treating of the
women of the
Western Roman Empire, and Mr. Carroll is solely
responsible for that
discussing the women of the Eastern Roman and Byzantine
Empires.

Differences of personal characteristics, based upon
dissimilarity of
national temperament, reveal themselves in these women
of Rome and
Constantinople, but the Christian principle, through its
transforming
and elevating influence on the lives of pagan women,
gives unity to the
volume, and presents a type of womanhood far superior to
any that had up
to this time been produced by the Orient or early Greece
or ancient
Rome.

ALFRED BRITTAIN,

MITCHELL CARROLL.

PART FIRST

WOMEN OF THE WESTERN EMPIRE

I

THE WOMEN OF THE GOSPEL NARRATIVE

The study of the early Christian women takes up a phase of the history of woman which is peculiar to itself. It is, in a sense and to a degree, out of historical sequence. It deals with a subject in which ideas and spiritual forces, rather than the effect of racial development, are brought into view. It presents difficulties all its own, for the reason that not only historical facts about which there can be no contention must be mentioned, but also theories of a more or less controversial nature. We shall endeavor, however, as far as is possible, to confine ourselves to the recapitulation of well-authenticated historical developments and to a dispassionate portrayal of those feminine characters who participated in and were influenced by the new doctrines of early Christianity.

In writing of the women who were the contemporaries and the acquaintances of the Founder of Christianity the difficulty is very greatly enhanced by the fact that everything related to the subject is not only regarded as sacred, but is also enshrined in preconceptions which are held by the majority of people with jealous partiality. Our source of information is almost exclusively the Bible; and to deal with Scriptural facts with the same impartiality with which one deals with the narrative of common history is well-nigh impossible. There are few persons who are exempt from a prejudicial leaning,

either in favor of
the supernatural importance of every Scriptural detail
or in opposition
to those claims which are commonly based upon the Gospel
history. We
hear of the Bible being studied merely as literature, a
method most
highly advantageous to a fair understanding of its
meaning and purport,
but possible only to some imaginary, educated person,
unacquainted with
the Christian religion and totally unequipped with
theological
conceptions. That which is true of the Bible as
literature is also
applicable to the Scripture considered as history.

Yet we shall endeavor to bear in mind that we are not
writing a
religious book, and that this is not a treatise on
Church history; it is
ordinary history and must be written in ordinary
methods. Consequently,
in order to do this subject justice and to treat it
rightly, we must
endeavor to remove the women mentioned in the Gospels as
far as possible
from the atmosphere of the supernatural and to see in
them ordinary
persons of flesh and blood, typifying the times as well
as the
circumstances to which they belonged. Though they played
a part in an
event the most renowned and the most important in the
world's history,
yet they were no more than women; in fact, they were
women so
commonplace and naturally obscure, that they never would
have been heard
of, were it not for the Character with whom they were
adventitiously
connected. A memorial has been preserved, coeval, and
coextensive with
the dissemination of the Gospel, of the woman who
anointed Christ; but

solely on account of the greatness of the Object of her devotion.

Our purpose in this chapter is to ascertain what manner of women they were who took a part in the incomparable event of the life of Christ, what their part was in that event, and how it affected their position and their existence.

The whole history of the Jewish race and all the circumstances relating thereto abundantly justify the application to the Jews of the term "a peculiar people." A branch of the great Semitic division, in many ways they were yet most radically distinguished from every other part of the human family. By many centuries of inspired introspection they had developed a religion, a racial ideal, and national customs which entirely differentiated them from all other Eastern peoples. The Jew is one of the most remarkable figures in history. First there is his magnificent contribution to religion and world-modifying influences, so wonderfully disproportionate to his national importance; then there is the marvellous persistency of his racial continuity.

That which set apart the Jews from other nations was mainly their religion. These peculiar people, inhabiting at the time of Christ a small tract of country scarcely larger than Massachusetts, deprived of national autonomy, being but a second-class province of the Roman Empire, nevertheless presumed to hold all other races in contempt, as being inferior to themselves. This religious arrogance, manifesting

itself in a vastly exaggerated conception of the superiority, both of their origin and of their destiny, surrounded the Jews with an impenetrable barrier of reserve. That national pride which in other peoples is based on the memory of glorious achievements on the battlefield, on artistic renown, or on commercial importance, found its support among the Jews in their religious history, in their divinely given pledges, and in laws of supernatural origin. And indeed they were a race of religious geniuses; they were as superior in this respect as were the Greeks in the realm of art and the Romans in that of government.

These facts, which are so universally acknowledged as to need no further reference here, warrant a closer study of the manner of life of the ancient Jewish women than that to which we can afford space.

In the Gospel narrative women hold a large place. As is natural, a very great deal of the grace and beauty of the record of Christ's life is owing to the spirit and presence of the feminine characters. This the Evangelists have ungrudgingly conceded. There does not seem to have been the least inclination to minimize the part played by women; indeed, their attitude toward Christ is by inference, and greatly to their credit, contrasted with that of the men. The women were immediately and entirely won to Christ's cause. They sat at His feet and listened with gratitude to the gracious words which He spake; they brought their

children to be blessed by Him; they followed Him with lamentations when He was led away to death. There were among their number no cavillers, no disbelievers, none to deny or betray. When the enemies of Jesus were clamoring for His death and His male disciples had fled, it was to the women He turned and said: "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children." Well might the instincts of the Daughters of Jerusalem incline them to sympathize with the work and suffering of the Man of Nazareth, for it is incontrovertible that no other influence seen in the world's history has done so much as Christianity to raise the condition of woman.

The position of woman in Palestine, though much inferior to that of man, was far superior to that which she occupied in other Oriental nations. Jewish law would not permit the wife to fall to the condition of a slave, and Israelitish traditions contained too many memories of noble and patriotic women for the sex to be held otherwise than in honor. A nation whose most glorious records centred around such characters as Sara, Miriam, Deborah, Esther, and Susanna could but recognize in their sex the possibility of the sublimest traits of character. Moreover, every Hebrew woman might be destined to become the mother of the long hoped for Messiah, and the mere possibility of that event won for her a high degree of reverence.

At the same time, the Jewish women, like those of all other ancient nations, were held in rigid subordination; nor was there

any pretence
made of their equality with men before the law. A man
might divorce his
wife for any cause: a woman could not put away her
husband under any
circumstances. A Jewish woman could not insist on the
performance of a
religious vow by which she had bound herself, if her
husband or her
father made objection. Yet, from the earliest times, the
property rights
of Israelitish women were very liberal. In the Book of
Numbers it is
recorded how Moses decreed that "If a man die, and have
no son, then ye
shall cause his inheritance to pass unto his daughter.
And if he have no
daughter, then ye shall give his inheritance unto his
brethren." But
tribal rights had to be considered. Possessions were not
to be alienated
from one tribe to another. Hence it was also decreed
that "Every
daughter that possesseth an inheritance in any tribe of
the children of
Israel, shall be wife unto one of the family of the
tribe of her father,
that the children of Israel may enjoy every man the
inheritance of his
fathers." In the time of Christ, however, this
restriction on marriage
was unnecessary, ten of the tribes not having returned
from the
Captivity. The house at Bethany where Jesus was
entertained belonged to
Martha; and we read of wealthy women following Him and
providing for His
needs out of their own private fortunes. In the early
days, among the
Hebrews, marriage by purchase from the father or
brothers had been the
custom; but in the time of which we are writing a dowry
was given with
the bride, and she also received a portion from the
bridegroom.

The inferior position of Jewish women is frequently referred to in the rabbinical writings. A common prayer was: "O God, let not my offspring be a girl: for very wretched is the life of women." It was said: "Happy he whose children are boys, and woe unto him whose children are girls." Public conversation between the sexes was interdicted by the rabbis. "No one", says the Talmud, "is to speak with a woman, even if she be his wife, in the public street." Even the disciples, accustomed as they were to seeing the Master ignore rabbinical regulations, "marvelled" when they found Him talking with the woman of Sychar. One of the chief things which teachers of the Law were to avoid was multiplying speech with a woman. The women themselves seem to have acquiesced in this degrading injunction. There is a story of a learned lady who called the great Rabbi Jose a "Galilean Ignoramus," because he had used two unnecessary words in inquiring of her the way to Joppa. He had employed but four.

By the Jews women were regarded as inferior not only in capacity but also in nature. Their minds were supposed to be of an inferior order and consequently incapable of appreciating the spiritual privileges which it was an honor for a man to strive after. "Let the words of the Law be burned," says Rabbi Eleazar, "rather than committed to women." The Talmud says: "He who instructs his daughter in the Law, instructs her in folly." In the synagogues women were obliged to sit in a gallery which was separated from the main room by a lattice.

Yet it is scarcely to be supposed that in everyday Jewish life the pharisaical maxims quoted above were adhered to with any great degree of strictness. Especially in Galilee, where there was much more freedom than in the lower province, it may well be imagined that there existed a wide difference between these arrogant "counsels of perfection" and the common practice. There is no doubt that the rabbis and the scribes observed the traditions to the minutest letter; but inasmuch as in these days it would be misleading to delineate the common life of a people by the enactments found on their statute books, we are justified in concluding that ordinary existence in ancient Palestine was not nearly such a burdensome absurdity as the rabbinical law sought to make it. Human nature will not endure too great a strain. At any rate, we can but believe that, subordinate as she may have been, the Jewish woman found ample opportunity to assert herself. The rabbi may have scorned to multiply speech with his wife on the street, but doubtless there were occasions which compelled the husband to endure a multiplicity of speech on the part of his wife at home. It was not without experience that the wise man could say: "A continual dropping on a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike."

The sayings of the scribes, which are derogatory to the female sex, are abundantly offset by many injunctions of an opposite nature which are found in the sacred and in the expository writings of the Jews. One of

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