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Exploring The Origins Of Masculine Bias Against Women

How and why did a bias against women originate and become so entrenched in Western culture? Archaeological evidence chronicles the high status of women in Mesopotamia several thousands years prior to the advent of Greece. In this paper I link this evidence with Greece, the earliest Western state, and its attitudes towards women. Greek mythology contains prehistoric content and these myths are scanned for masculine bias and the subterranean issue which shape their content. The mythological and prehistoric foundations are examined along with the major factors triggering their emergence and significance to the development of states and the associated subordination of women.

Scant attention needs to be paid to the Romans because much of their culture is an elaboration of the more original Greek antecedent, with the exception of Roman Law. The focus of the discussion then shifts to the Hebraic attitudes toward women. Similarities between Biblical and Greek myths are noted, in terms of content and the principal factors underlying their editing and application. One myth, the origin of evil, is utilized as the model for analysis. This analysis continues as I examine Christianity as a new religion containing Yahwistic, Judaic, and pagan mythic roots as it develops a theology.

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This paper does not purport to be a comprehensive analysis. That would encompass several volumes. Instead it traces the origins of bias against women and associates it with the rise of Western states. According to Poulain de la Barre, "Everything written about women by men ought to be suspect, for these men are at the same time judge and litigant. . . ."1

Is there a reasonable and rational person today who will not concede that women are and have been in recorded history treated differently than men? Some would hasten to argue that being treated differently is not inherently a proof of discrimination. This qualification is usually based on two perceptions of determinism. One posits that women are dependent upon (inferior to) men in the natural order and that it is the natural order which prescribes roles for women and defines women's work—the selection and specialization in those tasks best suited for females. Therefore, unequal treatment is not the consequence of any significant bias by men.

The other view of determinism attributes the unequal treatment of women to the functional prerogatives of women to incubate, nurse, and nurture, which separates them from men and leads to the cultural inference (norm) that male tasks are distinct from (superior to) female tasks, hence, feminine insubordination is legitimized.

Usually these two versions of determinism are mixed.

This is the male problem: the positing of a difference, the establishment of a dichotomy emphasizing oppositeness. Men are to behave this way, women in that, women do this, men do the other. The way men behave

¹Robert Kress. *Wither Womankind?: The Humanity Of Women*, (St. Meinrad, In: Abbey Press, 1975) 1.

is important and valuable, while what women do is unimportant and trivial.²

Applying the analogy of Blacks in the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth centuries to women, gives us an empirical model that graphically illustrates and totally repudiates the conclusions of both arguments for masculine dominance. Just as it was popularly thought and taught that "Blacks are beasts," biologically determined to be slaves, with pseudo scientific and scriptural proof texts seriously cited, these same biased arguments are recast and used against women. These are vain attempts to validate the oppression of women and conveniently exonerate male bias.

While refutation by the analogy above is useful, one still must respond to the evidence cited in the appeals to natural order that seem to justify the bias. One response states:

Distinctions of human characteristics and temperaments into *innate* male and female natures have been social, cultural constructs and are not natural. They are a part of an ideology that attempts to make what are in fact social and political distinctions appear to be natural and biological and, therefore, to justify differences in social roles and also relationships of dominance and subordination. Furthermore, that which can be "shown" to be natural easily becomes the norm that justifies rules and mores from which deviance warrants disapproval or punishment.³

²Bettye and Theodore Rosak. *Masculine/Feminine Readings In Sexual Mythology and Liberation of Women*, (New York; Harper & Row, 1969) 304.

³Ruth Blier, *Science and Gender: A Critique of Biology and Its Theories of Women*, (New York: Pergamon International Library Of Science, Technology, Engineering and Social Studies, Pergamon Press Inc., 1984) 7.

Another response attacks the notion that masculine dominance is the norm in natural ordering. For example, the dominant male lion or "king" of beasts does very little (usually nothing) in terms of providing for himself or his pride. It is the lionesses who hunt to feed themselves, their young, and the male.

Ethel Tobach in "Some Evolutionary Aspects of Human Gender,"⁴ presents a comprehensive survey of evidence that ordering in nature does not validate the interpretation of masculine superiority. Tobach's central points are as follows:

1. Sex is biological while gender is sociological.
2. Some plants and animals produce asexually.
3. There are many hermaphroditic species (having the both male and female sexual organs).
4. The reproductive process; fertilization, incubation and nurturing, is accomplished in a diversity of behavioral patterns which extend even to mammals.
5. Generalizations about gender roles is difficult other than in mating.
6. And social experience has a profound effect on human behavior.

Tobach concludes by saying;

Changing social customs, traditions, and roles is inherent in being human. It seems invalid to attempt to use concepts from revolutionary biology to justify either retaining old traditions or changing them. The answers lies in understanding human history and behavior.⁵

⁴Helen Worthis and Clara Rainowitz, eds., *The Women's Movement: Sociological and Psychological Perspectives*, (New York: Published for the American Orthopsychiatric Association by AMS Press Inc., 1972) 2-9.

⁵*Ibid.*, 9.

Examining human history often involves decoding myths. Myths are a universal phenomenon in human history and require careful explication consistent with the state of affairs operating during the creation of the story.⁶ Myths are stories containing the extract or essence of human experiences or projections about the mysteries of the "origins of life or evil, sex and procreation, or human destiny beyond death."⁷ All myths have a point of view and are advocates of a particular course of action, type of response/attitude, or signal of affirmation, depending on the options available. The impact of myths will be discussed after the aims of the myth makers are examined.

Prejudice against women, avowed or covert, institutional or personal, goes back to the very beginning of Western culture, to its foundations in Greece, Rome and Israel.⁸ Several millennia prior to the rise of Greece, an ancient civilization existed in which women had high social status.

Excavation of *Catal Huyuk*, an advanced neolithic society in Anatolia. . . from around 6250-5400 B.C.E. indicates that the inhabitants. . . practiced intensive irrigation agriculture and had highly developed arts, crafts, and religion, complete with symbolism and methodology.⁹

Artifacts from this site show the central importance of women in agriculture, hunting, long distance trading, ritual leader-

⁶J.W. Robinson, "Slippery Words: Myth," *The Expository Times* 90 (October 1978): 10-11.

⁷John Baker, "The Myths Of Man's 'Fall': A Reappraisal," *The Expository Times*, 92, (May 1981):235.

⁸John Peradatto and J.P. Sullivan, eds., *Women In The Ancient World*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) 1.

⁹Bleir, Ruth. *Science and Gender*. New York: Pergamon Press Inc., 1984, p. 153.

ship and as deities. "It appears that the principal deity was a goddess."¹⁰ Is this an aberration or, "Did earliest man (humans) think of and worship God as a woman, especially as the "Great Mother?"¹¹ David Baile took the Biblical divine name, "El Shaddai," and examined exhaustively its Akkadian, Ugartic, Arabic, and Hebraic roots. After the linguistic and cultural analysis, Biale concludes that although *El Shaddai* is legitimately associated with the mountain god early in the Old Testament and applied in Yahwism, it must be understood literally as "the god with breasts."¹² Numerous artifacts of prehistoric humans depict a feminine deity, often as an extraordinarily obese woman. The most familiar of these is the so-called Venus of Willendorf to which we can add her sister from Gogarine and most recently, those discovered at *Catal Huyuk*. There on the walls of the most important shrine is a row of breasts.¹³

The discovery of the strong feminine presence in prehistory is vital because it documents reasons for the development of myths to control and subordinate women in recorded history. The advent of patriarchal states made necessary the creation of a deliberate bias against women.

Catal Huyuk is considered to be the earliest known prototype of an advanced Neolithic society, from which the Sumerian (Mesopotamian) states developed beginning around 4000 B.C.E.. Rohlich analyzes the extensive excavations of Sumer, which have provided one of the most complete records of the transformation of

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 153.

¹¹J. Edgar Burns, *God As A Woman. Woman As God*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1973) 7.

¹²David Biale, "The God With Breast: El Shaddai in the Bible," *History of Religions: An International Journal Of Comprehensive Religious History*. 20 (February 1982): 240-256.

¹³P. Burns and Pomeroy, Sarah P. *Goddesses. Whores. Wives and Slaves: Women In Classical Antiquity*. (New York,: Schocken Books, 1975) 1,2,8,12.

women's positions from one of preeminence in the early city states to one of subordination in the established state around 2000 B.C.E.. Similar developments have been documented for societies in meso-America beginning about 800 A.D.¹⁴

Transformation of matriarchal communities into patriarchal states necessitated the subordination of strong women.

The state represents, thus far the most complete codification and institutionalization of patriarchal authority and the separation of women and men into private and public spheres.¹⁵

States (males) decreed monogamy for women, effected the norm of male dominated families and structured the ideological and sociological development of children into gender and class roles. "Thus," says Rogerson, "states were able to codify into law, the economic, social and political subordination of women."¹⁶

Myths are a media that explain and justify.¹⁷ Poets, philosophers, and religious writers took the myths, shaped and codified them in what developed into Western norms, political thought, and religious documents. "Greece gave us the idea of democracy (excluding women and slaves); Rome gave us most of our legal systems; and Israel ultimately provided the foundation for all Judaeo-Christian forms of religions."¹⁸ Unquestionably, "Both Greece and Rome were intensely patriarchal."¹⁹

¹⁴Bleir, 153.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 158,159.

¹⁶Rogerson, 10, 11

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Peradotta and Sullivan, p. 2

¹⁹Kress, Robert. *Whither Womankind?* (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 1975), p. 51

An obvious consequence of this sort of social system was, from a feminist perspective (or any neutral observer), the abiding predisposition of myth makers, poets and philosophers to justify the status quo in which women are subjugated and regarded as both dangerous and inferior, whose sexual subjectivity must be rigidly controlled in order to sustain a social system based in part on the exchange of women.²⁰

Classical mythology provides a plethora of examples demonstrating the suppression of matriarchy and the rise of patriarchy.²¹ Homer, one of the earliest Greek poets (8th century BCE) exhibits some of the same bias in the "condemnation of Clytemnestra by Agamenon's Shade: 'so nothing is more dreadful or disgraceful than a woman—at least the kind that devises such deeds in her mind. . .'"²² The Homeric women are generally good housekeepers, child care providers and very solicitous of their husbands.²³ But Hesiod (ca. 700 BCE) is most implicit on this subject:

His views of gods and humankind not only shaped but probably correspond to the ideas held by the population as a whole, and thus the *Theogony* becomes the standard Greek version of divine evolution. Hesiod details the divine progression from female-dominated generations, characterized by natural, earthy emotional qualities, to the superior and rational monarchy of Olympian Zeus.²⁴

²⁰Peradotta and Sullivan, p. 2

²¹Pomeroy, p.1,2. Also using this approach is Marilyn B. Arthur, "Early Greece: The Origins of Western Attitude Toward Women," *Women In Antiquity*, (Buffalo, New York: Published for the Department of Classics, State University of New York, 1973) 7-58.

²²Arthur, Marilyn B. "Early Greece: The Origins Of Western Attitudes Toward Women." *Woman In Antiquity*. (Buffalo: Department of Classics, State University of New York, 1973).

²³*Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁴Pomeroy, Sarah P. *Goddesses~ Whores and Slaves*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

Mother goddesses prominent in the Bronze Age cults of the Minoan Crete,

appear late in Greek myths as Ge, Rhea, Hera, Demeter and Cybele ...The male-female tension in Greek myth can be explained as the result of a forced marriage between the conquering god and a formerly powerful but vanquished goddess.²⁵

Hesiod pits strong women and men in conflict from which Zeus emerges supreme, establishing masculine superiority on Olympus and the denial of power to women.²⁶ Pandora (comparable to Eve of the Bible) is introduced as the source of woe to humankind who simultaneously represents the threats of matriarchy and the need for masculine domination.²⁷ These myths advocate patriarchy so strongly that:

It is therefore not surprising that, Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Apollo justifies Orestes' slaying of his mother, Clytemnestra, by what could only be called sexist biology: the male oriented *polis* is more important than blood-ties, but even if blood is important, then the son is really the blood relative only of the father, the mother being merely the receptacle for the bearing of the child.²⁸

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p.2.; the status of female gods was on this order: unmarried, she was subject to her father; married, she passed into the power of her husband; widowed, she would belong to her son or a similar representative or relative. Kress, p.52.

²⁷Arthur, pp. 2-4.

²⁸Peradotta and Sullivan, p. 2.

Euripides states that no evil is so terrible as woman.²⁹ Peradotta and Sullivan conclude in their book, *Women in the Ancient World*, that other myths capture the antagonism of the conflict between male and female preeminence better than the elaborate mythology of Greece, which was inherited by Rome and remained dominant until the advent of Christianity.

Later Aristotle translated the myths which Aeschylus presented dramatically over 100 years earlier into "scientific terms." Aristotle was a biologist, but what was known in his century about women was meager.³⁰ He defined women as a "mutilated male" and the female body as a

departure from the norm of the male body. Women and slaves are the natural and biological inferiors of the patriarchal male citizen. Marriage, therefore, is *ipso facto*, an unequal relationship since justice is giving each one his due. Unequals receive unequal treatment.³¹

Aristotelian pronouncements about the inferiority of women (and slaves) represents a possible origin of Western scientific assertions supporting a bias against women, transferring the proof of women's inferiority from its more subjective mythic and dramatic roots to rational and supposedly objective grounds as "science." Plato's *Republic* contains the view that "Of all men who came into the world, those who were cowards or led unrighteous lives may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation . . ."³² Plato, Aristotle, and other writers

²⁹Kress, p. 54.

³⁰Arlene Swidler, *Woman in a Man's Church*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1972) 12.

³¹Cited in Peradotta and Sullivan, p. 2.

³²Kress, p. 55.

of the period formulated ideas which pervade the various scholarly writings of later ages.

Roman women generally enjoyed greater freedoms and dignity than Greek women. For example, a woman whose father died or who attained age 25 under a guardian was regarded as independent. She was able to terminate a marriage in the same way as her husband—by a simple declaration of divorce. However, the cult of Isis, an ancient Egyptian religion, provided a challenge to the Roman patriarchal cults and was viciously suppressed at times. Ultimately both Romans and Christians adopted elements of this cult and directed the powers of the Egyptian goddess into practices regarding virginity, marriage and motherhood.³³

Turning now to the Old Testament, one writer notes that,

Perhaps no human belief system held women in such contempt as that of the "Fall of Man"...As a universal rule, the stronger the belief in the Fall of Man doctrine in any society, the more social, political, and economic position of women becomes degraded in that society.³⁴

Similarities between the Bible's Eve and the Greek's Pandora seem too strong to be merely coincidental. Both women desire and acquire knowledge that becomes disastrous to humankind. It seems highly probable that both variations were designed to address the conflict between male and female ordered societies. In fact, they are both in the mold of the Sumerian myth of Inanna and Enki. According to that account, Inanna wants the *mes* or keys to civilization, the rules and regulations governing religion, social, and cosmic realities (i.e. kinship, art, truth, and music). She visits Enki,

³³Pomeroy, pp. 217-225.

³⁴Hyman I. Schenker, *Woman In Transition Throughout The History of Hebrew and Non-Hebrew Races*, (New York: Jewish Forum Publishing Company, Inc. 1938) 39.

who calls her daughter and provides a lavish feast. But while carried away by food, wine, and charm, Enki gives the *mes* to Inanna (the seductress?). Later, Enki tries to renege on his decision, but Inanna prevails. Nevertheless, by her ambition and knowledge woe comes to the human family.³⁵ Given the location of Sumer and the fact that it predates the Greek and the Hebrew myths by thousands of years, plus the tendency of later civilizations to adopt and re-work tenets of earlier groups, one must concede the very high probability that both of these later cultures were influenced by their ancient predecessors. John Baker in his article, "The Myth Of Man's Fall—A Reappraisal," makes the case that:

1. Accepting this or any myth uncritically is untenable
2. This story has been misinterpreted by the Christian Church;
3. Humans do not fall, but are awakened to moral choice.
4. Exercising human choice can be co-creative or destructive.³⁶

Additionally, the pericope of the Fall in Genesis 3:1f appears likely to be interpretive of the patriarchal versus matriarchal struggle as treated in Hebraic mythology and culture. Another comprehensive study of this passage documents how a number of extra-biblical sources were assimilated to impute to women the blame for human misery and sin.³⁷ Regardless of the methodology employed, liberation and freedom in Christ mandates that this myth can no longer

³⁵Burns, pp. 16-18.

³⁶Baker, pp. 235-239.

³⁷Rosemary R. Reuther, "Woman: Seductive, Siren and Source of Sin," *Religion and Sexism*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974) 90-90-97; see also, F.R. Tennant, *Doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) pp. 52-90.

legitimately be used to justify the subordination of women. Similarly, the other myths of the Bible that state or imply unequal treatment for women must be interpreted in the light of a dynamic understanding and knowledge of what it means to become a people of God and as transformers of oppressive cultures and systems. Rosemary Ruether's collections of essays, *Religion and Sexism* is an exhaustive analysis of Biblical attitudes/values as they relate to women and demolishes these as foundations for masculine bias.

Christianity began as a Jewish sect. Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples were Jews; therefore, one should expect the attitudes of the adherents to this religion to reflect its roots in Yahwism and Judaism. Modern New Testament scholarship has shown that the Gospel writers have definite points of view, so that the Synoptics and John contain material deliberately selected and arranged to present the writers' perspectives. Women's equality was not an issue for these authors and their presentation of the life of Jesus does not speak directly to this issue. Yet, many times in the Gospels Jesus is depicted as violating established social norms and demonstrating an interest in and respect for women: e.g., healing a woman who was ritually unclean and a social outcast (Mark 5:25-34; Matthew 9:20-22; Luke 8:43-48); speaking at lengths publicly with a woman about theological matters (John 4:1f); using women as the protagonist in his stories (Luke 15:8-9, 18:1-8; Matthew 25:1-13); noting the faith of a woman who withstood rebuke to receive her (Mt.15:22-28); and complimenting Mary for choosing to sit at his feet rather than concentrate on traditional "female" tasks.³⁸

Unfortunately, the untraditional character of Jesus towards women is, in many instances, interpreted in the Early Church by men who view these acts through traditional lens. In many ways

³⁸Swidler, Arlene. *Women in Man's Church*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), pp. 36-37.

the Fathers of the Early Church were even more demeaning in their attitudes toward women than those who preceded them. Eileen Stevensen notes that "The development of Christian ideology was made more complex because its affinities are both Jewish and Gentile resulting in cross-cultural linkages."³⁹

The cross-cultural links reinforced the Greco-Roman masculine biases and facilitated a unification with Hebraic bias in the critically formative Patristic period. Some prominent examples of biases against women from this era include the following quotations: Tertullian is famous for his statement, "You (referring to women) are the devil's gateway." According to Epiphanius, "Woman is easily seducible, weak, and without great understanding." Origen is more harsh, concluding that God does not even look at women: "What is seen by the eyes of the Creator is masculine not feminine; for God does not deign to look at that which is feminine and fleshly."

Stevensen establishes in Christianity the "link between Jewish idealism and pagan mythology . . ." regarding Jesus' birth, death atonement and resurrection.⁴⁰ The same linkages apply to the attitude of masculine bias.

It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that the Church Fathers were fanatical ascetics and haters of women.⁴¹ First, to do so would be to critique persons of an earlier age by the standards, interests, and insights of an advanced era. Secondly, persons of any age are the products of that given genetic/cultural/environmental/historical matrix interacting with the cosmos. Therefore, any person of a particular time period is both a shaper and is being shaped.

³⁹Eileen Stevensen, "Some Insight from the Sociology of Religion Into the Origin and Development of the Early Christian Church," *The Expository Times*, 90 (July 1979): 304.

⁴⁰Kress, pp. 150,163.

⁴¹Rosemary R. Reuther, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism In the Fathers of the Church." *Religion and Feminism*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 150.

He or she should be rated against the norms of that particular period. Thirdly, by the norms of the Patristic period the Church Fathers were acting responsibly. Moreover, Patristic theology developed Mariology (4th Century AD) and three basic views of women. Mariology was the highest, but ordinary women qualified as women—as wives who were dutiful, obedient, and subservient domestics; and a third view saw women as whores.⁴²

Conclusions

Many others contributed to the masculine bias outlined in the preceding pages, but they only refined and expanded upon ancient themes. Among the more significant refiners were St. Thomas Aquinas and Sigmund Freud. Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* brings together in synthesis traditional thought and the science and philosophy of ancient Greece. Freud's well known and documented bias is particularly nettlesome because his work performs for his age the same enormous negative, pseudoscientific legitimization of female subjugation as Aristotle's "scientific" observations. Penis envy is perhaps the most damning Freudian concept. On the other hand, Ashley Montague provides solid evidence for masculine envy of feminine biological prerogatives.⁴³

Masculine bias against women has origins which antedate the advent of Western civilization and continues to this very day. Assigning blame is useless. It wastes analytical abilities and energies that could be better employed to address the systemic vestiges of the inequities that women continue to experience. Persons of the

⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 150-153.

⁴³Ashley Montague, *The Natural Superiority Of Women*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1953) 33,36.

distant past who contributed to the masculine superiority complex must be viewed against the backdrop of their particular matrix of time and cultural norms. Nevertheless, those who insist upon holding the same attitudes today must not be allowed to escape confronting their oppressive and unChristian values. People today should reap the benefit of prior human experiences and current insights are rapidly expanding and revealing past errors. With such benefits comes the responsibility to provide new options for the creation of societies that reward competence and excellence regardless of gender.

It is hoped that this paper will heighten masculine sensitivity to the oppression of women. The goal is that women and men are encouraged to struggle together in anticipation of the time when all persons are evaluated by norms that are pertinent and just. Then the highest aspirations, aptitudes, and accomplishments of all people will not be limited by minuscule amounts of hormones that determine one's gender as an embryo during prefetal life.