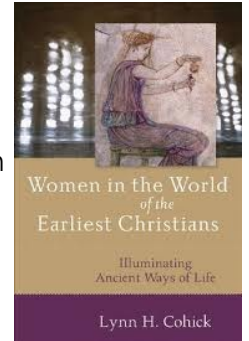


women in the world of the earliest Christians: illuminating ancient ways of life

Lynn H Cohick (Baker Academic, 2009)

While arguments continue as to women's role in the early Church and women's ministry today, scholars have been researching the background to the New Testament, including the social context. This fascinating book aims to paint a portrait of real women's lives in the first century. The author's impetus for writing was a sense of frustration over analyses of New Testament women, plus what she sees as blindspots and misinformation informing some arguments.



The book covers the time frame 330BC-100AD (the Greco-Roman period) and takes a historical approach, also using sociological, literary and feminist critique. It is closely argued, and not a quick or simple read, but the details repay close attention and build up to a give a depth of insight into women's lives which I have not found elsewhere.

The book covers women as daughters, wives and mothers, the religious activities of gentile and Jewish women, women's work, slavery and prostitution, and women's role as benefactors and patrons. I was particularly struck by the contrast between prescriptions for women's lives, and descriptions (as seen in letters, inscriptions and documents), the former being more well known but the latter more likely to convey the reality of women's lives.

In her chapter on marriage, Cohick explores competing views of male and female: Platonic and Aristotelian. While the latter was more influential, both of these held woman to be inherently inferior to man, and this played itself out in society. According to Aristotle, the family is the smallest unit of social organisation, but a microcosm of wider society: the husband was to rule his family (wife, children and slaves) much as a king rules his colony. In an 'honour and shame' culture, family honour was important, and the backbone of social stability was the husband governing his wife. The wife's role was to obey her husband and to manage the 'household'. Cohick notes that 'failure to follow the dominant culture's expectations for wifely submission would cast a shadow over the early Christian movement.' In other words, one way of interpreting Titus 2:3-5 ('...to be subject to their husbands') is to see it as a concession to the culture rather than implying a permanently hierarchical relationship. Certainly one sees from this chapter how wide is the gap between 1st and 21st century women's lives, and thus the need for care in directly applying from one context to the other.

The book also uncovers differences between the lives of the rich and the poor. Employing a wet-nurse, for example, was a status symbol, as was being a woman of leisure. Then, as now, poor women worked hard in the home and the fields, while middle class women would have had more opportunities outside the home, and were involved in various kinds of economic activity. It is interesting to note that women who spoke in public were seen as invading male space, but women were barred only from politics and the military. In exploring women's religious activity Cohick notes that Pliny's letters refer to the 'new cult' whose leaders were women, and cites Celcus' second-century jibe that Christianity is a religion of women and slaves. She also revisits the controversy about Junia, and reminds readers that Junia was only turned into a man in the late thirteenth century.

The chapter on patronage is particularly helpful, as this is a social institution which does not have a parallel in our society and thus has not been well understood. What did it mean for Phoebe to be a patron? We are shown how Phoebe, Lydia, Joanna and others all fit into a complex structure of relationships as patrons or benefactors.

A carefully written book, which gives fascinating insights into the social context of New Testament women and into some particular women named in Scripture. Well worth reading.

Rosie Ward © CPAS 2011