

Unravelling the Threads: The Origins of Women's Asceticism in the Earliest Christian Communities

Patricia Moss

Abstract: The question of the origins of women's asceticism in Christianity is one of the most intriguing puzzles in the history of the early church, at first glance seeming to appear virtually out of nowhere. This paper seeks to untangle the threads of evidence a little, first by exploring the precedents for women's asceticism in the Jewish and Græco-Roman worlds, and then by suggesting possible motives for Christian women's asceticism in Corinth and the community of the Pastoral Epistles.

ATTEMPTING TO TRACE THE ORIGINS of women's asceticism in the earliest Christian communities is like trying to unravel a tangle of embroidery threads at the bottom of a workbasket. Promising leads come to nothing, or else disappear into a tantalisingly chaotic bundle of snippets. It is impossible to weave the threads into a coherent whole. Despite the fact that female asceticism outside a few well-defined areas was virtually unheard of in the first-century Mediterranean, second century texts such as the Apocryphal *Acts* indicate that ascetic women did exist very early in the history of Christianity – quite possibly from the beginning, and probably in greater numbers than men. What inspired them? And why?

This study constitutes a preliminary survey of the possible origins and early development of asceticism as an option for women in early Christianity, first through noting its Jewish and Græco-Roman antecedents, and then by investigating hints of its practice in the Reign of God movement and the earliest communities, particularly the Corinthian community and the group which produced the Pastoral Epistles.¹ In each case I will move from the general, mostly male, situation to the

1. Evidence for women's asceticism is also found in many of the Gnostic writings, some of which are thought to date back to the first century. However, due to uncertainties in dating this material it will not be considered in the present study.

specific, asking whether Christian women may have adopted and adapted masculine practices and beliefs as their own, or whether other factors were operating which made asceticism attractive to women for exclusively feminine reasons. I have chosen to use Turid Karlsen Seim's definition of asceticism as meaning sexual continence or chastity, sometimes substituted in the case of women by the term "virginity". Such continence is absolute, lifelong and completely voluntary. It may coincide with a practice of fasting and poverty, though this is not necessarily implied.²

As a resource for reconstructing the history of women, the available source material suffers from the usual shortcomings associated with male authorship and interpretation. Very little is written about women in the first century of the common era, let alone women's asceticism, and then from a masculine point of view which may well reflect men's opinions of women and what they ought to be doing, rather than recording what women actually thought and did. To redress this imbalance it is necessary to shift the focus of interpretation, placing women and women's asceticism at the centre of the frame, and applying feminist techniques – such as a hermeneutic of suspicion and a reading against the grain of the text – in order to tease out some of those slender, tangled threads of evidence.

ASCETICISM IN LATE ANTIQUITY

(a) Judaism

The family unit is central to Jewish theology, in that marriage and family life are the vehicles for transmitting the covenant, generation to generation, until the end of time.³ More tellingly, the preservation of the Jewish religion through Jewish bloodlines was the particular responsibility of women.⁴ Consequently, marriage and procreation were so much the expected norm for women in the period under discussion that Dorothy Sly concludes that there was no respectable position for single women in Jewish society.⁵ The only recorded exceptions in the first century to the universal expectation that all adults would marry and procreate were the communities of the Essenes in Israel, the Therapeutics of Alexandria, and the lifestyle of the prophet.

Though the Dead Sea Scrolls do not mention celibacy explicitly, Philo, Josephus and Pliny the Elder attest to its practice among males in

2. Turid Karlsen Seim, "Ascetic autonomy? New perspectives on single women in the early church", *Studia Theologica* 43 (1989) 137 n.1.

3. Blu Greenberg, "Female sexuality and bodily functions in the Jewish tradition", in Jeanne Becher (ed.), *Women, religion and sexuality: studies on the impact of religious teachings on women* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991) 7.

4. Jo Ann McNamara, "Wives and widows in early christian thought", *International journal of women's studies* 2 (1979) 577.

5. Dorothy Sly, *Philo's perception of women* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 32, 34.

the community at Qumran.⁶ While not denying the presence of some women and children at Qumran, a fact authenticated by excavations in the cemeteries on the site, scholars generally assume that the vast majority of the population consisted of ascetic males, with some lesser status males being allowed to marry, as did Essenes in the wider Jewish community.⁷

Jerome Kodell proposes two reasons for this preference for celibacy. First, the demands of cultic purity in contemporary Judaism meant that a man was excluded from worship for a day after an emission of semen, and this would have posed difficulties in a community in which ritual formed an integral part of each day. Secondly, eschatological expectations required the community to remain in a constant state of preparedness for the expected final Holy War between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, involving a permanent state of ritual purity (see the War Rule 1QM 7.3-4).⁸ While these precepts are not particularly applicable to Christianity, shared eschatological expectations may have played some part in inspiring Christians to lead ascetic lifestyles.

If, however, the Qumran ascetics were exclusively male, there seems little reason for Christian women to follow their example, whatever Christian men might do. Essene women, so the theory goes, like all Jewish women, existed only in the context of their family relationships. Or did they? The application of a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion to both archaeological and textual evidence leads one to question the (masculine) assumption that women at Qumran were very much in the minority and on the periphery. Linda Bennett Elder questions how, on the basis of the excavation of just over four percent of the graves in the main and secondary cemeteries, thirty percent of which contained the remains of women and children, the implicit assumption has been made that all the female remains have now been excavated and that the community was overwhelmingly male.⁹

Both Elder and Bonnie Bowman Thurston, citing Baumgarten's earlier work, argue on the basis of the texts 1QSa 1.4-11 and 4Q502 that ascetic women were indeed present at Qumran. While Thurston posits the existence of a female order for the aged, possibly the forerunner of the order of widows,¹⁰ Elder argues for the full participation in the life of the community of a wide variety of people, including married

6. Jerome Kodell, "The celibacy logion in Matthew 19:12", *Biblical theology bulletin* 8 (1978) 20.

7. See, for example, Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea scrolls in English* (3rd edn. London: Penguin, 1987) 8-9.

8. Kodell, "The celibacy logion in Matthew 19:12", 20.

9. Linda Bennett Elder, "The woman question and female ascetics among Essenes" *Biblical archeologist* 57 (1994) 223-5.

10. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The widows: a women's ministry in the early church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 24.

women and older "venerable" women who may or may not have married.¹¹ Elder's definition of asceticism stops short of including celibacy,¹² making her argument not completely relevant to the present study. Her work does, however, lead to the conclusion that assumptions made about the community need to be questioned in the light of feminist hermeneutics, and that the example of women at Qumran may have had some bearing on the lifestyle choices of women in the early Christian communities.

Philo, in his *On the contemplative life*, records that women were included in the ascetic community of the Therapeutics near Alexandria.¹³ Opinions differ on whether Philo is describing an actual community or, in the interests of Jewish apologetics, presenting his idealised conception of what a contemplative community ought to be, in contrast to existing Greek philosophical schools. For the purposes of this study, the historicity or otherwise of the community is immaterial. What matters is what Christian readers and hearers may have derived from Philo. Precedents for later Egyptian Christian monasticism are clearly evident here in the description of a community of solitary contemplatives who came together weekly to celebrate the Sabbath. However, there is no evidence for this type of communal asceticism in Christianity before the fourth century.

Significantly, there is no trace here of Philo's usual misogyny.¹⁴ The Therapeutrides are described as "elderly virgins who have retained their purity...of their own free will, out of their zealous desire for wisdom."¹⁵ Cultural conventions concerning women's appropriate behaviour are observed, with leadership being male and women's participation in the communal meal and worship happening behind a screen so as not to violate the ethos which sees woman as belonging in the private sphere. Interestingly, the women are presented as being in no way spiritually inferior to the men in the community, since for Philo, to be virginal is to be spiritually male.¹⁶ Elsewhere in Philo's writings it is apparent that he believes that virginity is an allegorical state to which a woman can return after menopause, when sexual desire no longer affects her.¹⁷ Since the Therapeutrides are described as childless and as having chosen Wisdom as their mate, they are evidently here presented

11. Elder, "The woman question", 232.

12. She defines asceticism as a mode of life characterised by voluntary self-denial for the purpose of spiritual discipline. See Elder, "The woman question", 233.

13. Philo, "On the contemplative life", introduced and translated by Gail Paterson Corrington, in Vincent L. Wimbush (ed.), *Ascetic behaviour in Greco-Roman antiquity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 134-55.

14. Ross Kraemer, "Monastic Jewish women in Greco-Roman Egypt: Philo Judaeus on the Therapeutrides", *Signs* 14 (1988) 355.

15. Philo, "On the contemplative life", 149.

16. Sly, *Philo's perception of women*, 19.

17. Sly, *Philo's perception of women*, 71-74.

as biologically virginal.¹⁸ Dorothy Sly concludes that the value which some early Christians placed on female virginity over and above the prescribed role of wife and mother may well have received its impetus from Philo.¹⁹

The Christian anthropology which equated female virginity with becoming spiritually male, if not derived directly from Philo, certainly has its roots in the same philosophical tradition which inspired him. Philo, with Greek philosophers in general, regarded the feminine as symbolising the lower, sensate part of the soul, and serving also as the symbolic representation of the sensible world, with all its negative connotations. The masculine, on the other hand, symbolised the mind and reason, the higher state of the soul, and the imperceptible world.²⁰ Mystical union with the divinity, the goal of philosophers, could be achieved only through purging the soul of all its female elements, becoming male and/or virgin.²¹ Though the image of the virgin as spiritually male is used extensively in Christian writings from the second century onwards, this anthropology is not immediately apparent in the period under discussion. That does not mean, however, that it was not operating implicitly.

The communities described above operated at the margins of the diverse groups which made up Judaism before 70 CE. Although temporary chastity might be practised in the interests of meeting the demands of ritual and cultic purity,²² permanent sexual abstinence was not a feature of mainstream Judaism except in the case of the prophet.²³ Wimbush notes that "ritual and cultic purity was understood to be necessary for rapprochement with God",²⁴ strengthening Peter Brown's argument that Jewish folklore associated sexual abstinence with the prophetic calling of those ascetic figures who periodically emerged from the wilderness to preach repentance. John the Baptist fits this mould.²⁵ This rare vocational celibacy is endorsed by the Talmud which depicts Moses as freely terminating cohabitation with his wife once he received the call from God.²⁶

Whether the women prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures practised sexual continence is a moot point. Deborah the prophetess is described

18. See also Kraemer, "Monastic Jewish women", 351-2.

19. Sly, *Philo's perception of women*, 223.

20. Kraemer, "Monastic Jewish women", 352-3.

21. Kraemer, "Monastic Jewish women", 353.

22. Vincent L. Wimbush, introduction to *Ascetic behaviour in Greco-Roman antiquity*, 5.

23. The Nazirite vow is a possible exception.

24. Wimbush, *Ascetic behaviour in Greco-Roman antiquity*, 5.

25. Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 40-41.

26. Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: a historian's reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973) 100; John P. Meier, *A marginal Jew: rethinking the historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 340. It should be noted that the Rabbis did not endorse celibacy as a general rule, since their primary focus was on procreation.

as “wife of Lappidoth” (Judg 4:4) and Huldah is “wife of Shallum” (2 Kgs 22:14). The texts give no indication concerning the women’s manner of prophesying, any preparations, preliminary purification or ritual that might be observed. However, the possibility of sexual continence is suggested by the description in Luke 2:36-37 of the prophet Anna, widowed many years, living a life of prayer and fasting in the temple before the advent of Jesus.

In summary, although permanent asceticism was limited to the margins of Judaism, the precedent nonetheless existed – at least for men. Both eschatological expectations and dedication to the pursuit of wisdom may have influenced early Christians to adopt an ascetic lifestyle, while traditions concerning the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures may have influenced those who practised prophecy. Jewish influence on women’s asceticism is less clear, since it is mentioned specifically only in the writings of Philo and also runs counter to everything prescribed for women in Judaism. Despite this, the possibility that the anthropology which saw the virgin woman as spiritually male was operating in first-century Hellenistic Judaism cannot be discounted.

(b) Græco-Roman World

Various forms of asceticism were practised in the Græco-Roman world, with temporary continence frequently being a prerequisite for ritual purity for men and women in both traditional worship and the mystery religions. On the other hand, celibacy was not commonly accepted and approved as a lifelong alternative to marriage,²⁷ particularly not for women. As in Judaism, early marriage with subsequent motherhood was the role expectation for girls. Marriage and procreation were particularly encouraged during the first century CE, not least because of falling birth rates among the aristocracy. As part of his program of reforms aimed at restoring ancient cultural, political and moral standards, the Emperor Augustus enacted legislation aimed at restoring the dignity and importance of marriage, especially in aristocratic circles. To encourage women to bear children, mothers of three (four for freedwomen) could dispense with their guardians, and widows under the age of fifty were obliged to remarry within two years or have their hereditary rights restricted.²⁸ Despite this, there is some evidence that asceticism was gaining popularity for other than religious reasons in late antiquity, though it would be an overinterpretation to imagine that it was widespread.²⁹

27. Seim, “Ascetic autonomy?”, 126.

28. Hugo Montgomery, “Women and status in the Greco-Roman world”, *Studia theologica* 43 (1989) 118.

29. Seim, “Ascetic autonomy?”, 126.

Among the educated male elite disbelief in the popular mythology was common, while the businesslike attitude of the state religion did not satisfy an innate human need for spiritual guidance. Philosophy filled the gap, with religious elements appearing in such a predominantly ethical system as Stoicism.³⁰ Some degree of asceticism, with or without sexual continence, was an integral part of the prevailing Stoic, Cynic and Epicurean philosophies. Greek philosophy supplied much of the language and conceptualisation of the ascetic lifestyle in late antiquity, having borrowed the term *askesis* from the athletic arena in order to convey the nature of the challenge of the philosophical or virtuous life.³¹ The idea of reinforcing theoretical knowledge of virtue by training in asceticism in order to strengthen both body and soul³² was appealing. At the same time, contemporary medical opinion favoured limiting male sexual activity since it was believed that the sex act involved the transmission of some of a man's "substance" to another, entailing a truly material loss with concomitant weakening.³³ All of this meant that in some circles of elite males, asceticism was practised for varying reasons.

The extent to which women were exposed to, or influenced by, philosophic ideas is difficult to gauge, not least because of the male-authored and anecdotal nature of the evidence. Richard Hawley contends that though the theories of masculine philosophy accommodated the possibility of female philosophers, in practice the number of women engaging in philosophy was very small. Often they were relatives of male philosophers and were regarded as something of a curiosity.³⁴ Even the philosopher, Hipparchia, wife of Crates the Cynic, was regarded in this light, a curious accessory of her husband's rather than a positive woman philosopher in her own right.³⁵ And although the first century Roman Stoics, Seneca and Musonius Rufus, both encouraged women's study of philosophy, they still envisaged women as embedded in the traditional patriarchal society.³⁶ Despite the uncertainty, it might still be argued that a significant masculine model of asceticism was available to the male relatives of precisely those

30. Frederick Copleston, *A history of philosophy, Vol.1. Greece and Rome* (London: Search Press, 1946) 380-81.

31. Wimbush, introduction to *Ascetic behaviour in Greco-Roman antiquity*, 3.

32. See Musonius Rufus, "On training" (Discourse VI), in *Ascetic behaviour in Greco-Roman antiquity*, 131-2.

33. Gail Paterson Corrington, "The defence of the body and the discourse of appetite: continence and control in the Greco-Roman World", *Semeia* 57 (1992) 66.

34. Richard Hawley, "The problem of women philosophers in ancient Greece", in Leonie J. Archer, Susan Fischler and Maria Wyke (eds.), *Women in ancient societies: an illusion of the night* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 70-71.

35. Archer, Fischler and Wyke (eds.), *Women in ancient societies*, 74.

36. Archer, Fischler and Wyke (eds.), *Women in ancient societies*, 75.

women who were the trend-setters in society, and that a trickle-down effect may have operated.

Medical reasons for women's sexual continence were another matter. Aline Rouselle concludes from the evidence for low birth rates among the Roman aristocracy that despite Augustus' efforts at encouraging aristocratic procreation by legislation, sexual continence was practiced by upper class women once they had produced the requisite three children, mainly through fear of the dangers of continued childbearing. This was both expected and admired.³⁷ Other women were not so fortunate. It was only through the sexual services of concubines, slaves and prostitutes that elite women could opt out.

The major exception to the rule of universal marriage for women were the Vestal Virgins, though there were only six of them at any one time and their period of service lasted thirty years after which they were free to marry.³⁸ Many however did not, so Plutarch claims, and those who did regretted it, thus inspiring the others to remain continent.³⁹ The fact that breaking the vow of chastity was punished by entombment suggests that Plutarch's claim may have been an attempt at male control rather than accurately reflecting the Vestals' opinions. At least until the inception of the Empire they enjoyed some of the same legal privileges as men, having been freed from the guardianship of father or husband.⁴⁰ Neither maidens nor matrons,⁴¹ their sexual status was indeterminate. Because of this, they were able to wield some of the religious powers traditionally reserved for men,⁴² in contrast to other women whose participation in the state cult was strictly marginal. The Vestals were thus ambivalent figures, enjoying a freedom and power which may have seemed attractive to other women, yet at the same time performing a service essential to the male dominated state cult and consequently under strict male control in the vital area of chastity. Despite this, did their relative freedom and greater participation in their religion inspire at least some Christian women who later experienced similar benefits?

Women's sexual continence was also practised in religions apart from the state cult. Priestesses of Greek cults such as those of Athena Polias or the Eleusian Demeter enjoyed the same rights and duties as priests, including ritual purity, which involved chastity. Virginity was

37. Aline Rouselle, "Body politics in ancient Rome", in Pauline Schmitt Pantel (ed.), *A history of women in the West 1: from ancient goddesses to Christian saints* (Cambridge, MA: The Bellknap Press, 1992) 315-24.

38. Plutarch, "The institution of the Vestal Virgins", *Life of Numa Pompilius* 10. See Ross S. Kraemer (ed.), *Maenads martyrs matrons monastics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 214.

39. Plutarch, "The institution of the Vestal Virgins".

40. John Scheid, "The religious roles of Roman women", in *A history of women in the West 1*, 384.

41. Though virgins, they wore the long robe and the hairband of the married woman.

42. Scheid, "The Religious Roles of Roman Women", 384.

not necessarily a prerequisite: the marital status of the priestess was determined by the cult. For example, the priestess of Heracles at Thespieae in Boeotia was required to remain a lifelong virgin. Others were usually free to marry after a set period.⁴³ In a similar manner, priestesses of the popular and widespread Isis religion, like its male priests, espoused a strict ascetic lifestyle.⁴⁴ Isiac rites of initiation, in common with other contemporary religions, required temporary continence in the interests of ritual purity,⁴⁵ and, most significantly, according to inscriptional evidence at least some virgins vowed themselves to Isis for life.⁴⁶

Prophecy was also an integral feature of Græco-Roman religions. In common with the Jewish view, the prophet had to be in a state of purity in order to become a channel of divine communication. Thus the Pythia of Delphi, for example, had to be a woman "pure of any carnal union and isolated throughout her life from all contact with relations and strangers".⁴⁷ Prophecy was generally, though not exclusively, the province of women. Louise Zaidman speculates that direct contact with the divine was such a frightening concept that men were quite happy to leave this to women.⁴⁸ Gail Paterson Corrington suggests that the ancients related women's receptivity to the prophetic message because of the receptive nature of female anatomy. Just as they were receptive and penetrated in intercourse, so were they also more open than men to the penetration of the divine, especially to the ecstatic type of possession ("having the god within").⁴⁹ Hence the concept of sexual purity for the prophet was widespread in the ancient world, in both Jewish and Græco-Roman circles.

To summarise, while a life of virginity or celibacy was not part of the Græco-Roman culture as a general rule, it was not unknown, and was in fact becoming more acceptable in some quarters. Of all the tangled threads which make up the history of asceticism in the first century Mediterranean, those holding the most promise as possible influences on Christian women's celibacy, apart from prevailing philosophical ideals, are the purity requirements for the prophet and the dedication of virgins to Isis. While probably not the primary motivation for religious asceticism, the unattached woman's comparative freedom from male

43. Louise Bruit Zaidman, "Pandora's daughters and rituals in Grecian cities", in *A history of women in the West* 1, 372-4. Cults associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood, such as those of Poseidon on the island of Sphaeria and the Artemis in Egira, Triclararia and elsewhere, generally required their priestesses to remain virgins for a limited period before being free to marry.

44. Elder, "The woman question and female ascetics among Essenes", 221.

45. R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman world* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971) 158.

46. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman world*, 66, 143-4.

47. Zaidman, "Pandora's daughters and rituals in Grecian cities", 375.

48. Zaidman, "Pandora's daughters and rituals in Grecian cities", 375.

49. Corrington, "The defence of the body and the discourse of appetite", 68.

control may well have been a most welcome additional benefit. Neither should the question of the dangers of childbirth be ignored. Though it is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament, shades of this fear may be implicit in 1 Cor 7:28c and 1 Tim 2:15.

ASCETICISM IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Among the heterogeneous mix of communities which made up first-century Christianity were some where asceticism was an optional lifestyle choice, if not the ideal. Tracing the origins of asceticism and its attraction for women in these communities is difficult because of the limitations of the sources, not least because they are androcentric in nature, but also because asceticism is seldom referred to directly.

The nature of the New Testament writings poses a further difficulty in that the Gospels in particular are not historical records, but rather traditions about Jesus' life interwoven with theological and christological interpretation with post-resurrection experiences of the early communities written back into the narrative. For this reason it is necessary to proceed with caution, where appropriate applying suitable criteria for authenticity to the text.⁵⁰ Even then conclusions so reached may simply indicate the existence of very strong traditions in the first communities rather than conclusive historical reconstructions of Jesus' life. This is significant when considering whether the sexual continence which later became such a strong identifying mark of Christianity may have originated with Jesus himself.⁵¹

(a) The Reign of God Movement⁵²

One of a number of Jewish reform movements which came and went during the period of the Roman occupation, the Reign of God movement comprised an itinerant, charismatic group of men and

50. For the purposes of this study the criteria recommended in Robert H. Stein, "The 'criteria' for authenticity", in R. T. France and D. Wenham (eds.), *Gospel perspectives*, Vol.1 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 225-53, and Meier, *A marginal Jew*, 168-95, will be applied to the relevant gospel texts.

51. That sexual continence became a well known distinguishing characteristic of Christianity may be seen in both pagan and Christian writings from the middle of the second century. Galen the Roman doctor wrote, "Their contempt for death is patent to us every day, and likewise their restraint from intercourse. For they include not only men but also women who refrain from intercourse all their lives." Quoted in Peter Brown, *The body and society*, 32. Defending Christianity, Justin Martyr in his *First Apology* (XV.6), boasts that he could produce "many, both men and women, who have been Christ's disciples from childhood, remain pure at the age of sixty or seventy years". See Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Vol.1. The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1979), 167.

52. I have chosen this title rather than the more common "Jesus Movement" because it more accurately describes the focus of Jesus' earthly mission, which he interpreted as announcing the imminent coming of the reign of God on earth (Mark 1:15).

women following Jesus in his mission of healing and preaching. One logical way for asceticism to have entered Christianity would be for it to have been practised by Jesus and at least some of his immediate entourage.

The situation is confused. Both the prophecy motif and the claim that Jesus was a "peasant Jewish Cynic"⁵³ suggest that Jesus may have been celibate, particularly when coupled with the fact that nowhere is there any mention of a wife and children. Lack of mention in the Gospels does not preclude their existence in the period prior to Jesus' ministry, or even during it. Marriage was so much the norm in first century Judaism that the existence of a wife and family might be taken for granted. Taken alone, the argument from silence proves nothing, but it may serve as corroborating evidence when various strands of speculation are drawn together into some kind of overall picture.

Jesus was almost certainly a disciple of John the Baptist for a time, and though he did not adopt John's radically separate lifestyle, he may have retained John's approach to sexual continence. The criterion of multiple attestation may be applied to suggest that Jesus' self-designation was as a prophet (Matt 10:41; Mark 6:4 and parallels; Luke 13:33; John 4:44).⁵⁴ His sense of having a unique prophetic call to give himself totally to his mission of calling Israel to repentance in preparation for the final coming of the reign of God⁵⁵ suggests a celibacy which is fully in accord with the masculine prophetic tradition in first-century Judaism.

The celibacy logion of Matt 19:12 has been the subject of considerable discussion and is generally thought to have originated in the early Christian community. However both John Meier and Jerome Kodell argue, on the basis of linguistics, discontinuity with received Jewish tradition, embarrassment at such a shocking metaphor and coherence with Jesus' supposed practice of celibacy, for its origins in Jesus himself.⁵⁶ Sexual abstinence fits with other radical demands made on followers of Jesus who repudiated all traditional ties to possessions, home and family to join the prophetic movement heralding the advent of the reign of God. This is attested in various texts, including Matt 8:18-22 (see Luke 9:57-60); Luke 5:28; Mark 3:31-35 and parallels; Mark 8:34-9:1 and parallels; Mark 10:17-31 and parallels. Whether these demands provided the motivation for asceticism during Jesus' lifetime

53. John Dominic Crossan, *The historical Jesus: the life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1991), 421-2. See also F. Gerald Downing, *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and other radical preachers in first century tradition*, JSOT Manuals 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988).

54. See also Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Re-membering Jesus: women, prophecy, and resistance in the memory of the early churches", *Horizons* 19 (1992) 205.

55. Meier, *A marginal Jew*, 342.

56. Kodell, "The celibacy logion in Matthew 19:12", 19. Meier, *A marginal Jew*, 343-5.

remains uncertain, but they may well have been interpreted in this way by later Christians.⁵⁷

The position of women in the movement has been the subject of considerable and ongoing debate. Their inclusion as equal members is suggested by the inclusiveness of the ministry of Jesus which reached out to the marginalised of all descriptions,⁵⁸ and also by Mark 15:40-41, Matt 27:55-56; and Luke 8:1-3, where the language of following and serving is considered by many to be indicative of fully co-equal discipleship.⁵⁹ Unexpected in a patriarchal society is the fact that while some of the women are identified by their relationship with a man, as propriety dictated,⁶⁰ a significant number appears to be unattached, including Mary of Magdala, Martha and Mary from Bethany (in Luke), Salome and Susanna. Were they widowed or divorced, or unmarried by choice? Was prophetic continence practised by men and women followers alike? If, as Mary Rose D'Angelo argues persuasively, the same prophetic spirit which empowered Jesus was shared by his men and women disciples alike,⁶¹ then at least some women in the movement may have been celibate.

Further motivation for celibacy in the Reign of God movement lies in the expectation of the imminent advent of that reign. As for the Essenes, the sense of living in the end times rendered normal social relationships, especially marriage and procreation, irrelevant.⁶² Such a belief suggests that the followers of Jesus during his lifetime, as well as the earliest Christians, were living in what might be described as a period of liminality, *pace* Victor Turner,⁶³ an interim period between two ages when normal social structures are turned upside down. There was a sense of being of this world yet not of this world, and so set apart by a distinctive lifestyle. The application of Turner's theories to early

57. Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and its meaning for women's sexuality in early Christianity", *Journal of feminist studies in religion* 2 (1986) 65.

58. Jesus is portrayed as the authorised limit breaker who redraws the purity maps of Israel to include the formerly excluded, women, gentiles, the physically imperfect whose handicaps excluded them from temple worship, social outcasts such as tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners. Jesus establishes new criteria for purity based on what is in a person's heart rather than the external criteria previously upheld. See Jerome H. Neyrey, "The idea of purity in Mark's Gospel", *Semeia* 35 (1986) 91-127.

59. See Suzanne Heine, *Women and early Christianity: are the feminist scholars right?* (London: SCM, 1987) 61.

60. For example, Mary the mother of James and Joses (or Joseph), the mother of the sons of Zebedee and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward.

61. D'Angelo, "Re-membering Jesus", 207-208.

62. Ross Shepherd Kraemer, *Her share of the blessings: women's religions among pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman world* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 139.

63. For further discussion, see Victor Turner, *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969). While Turner's work was on ritual, and the liminal period is defined as that time in a rite of passage when an individual belongs to neither one state nor the other, parallels with early Christianity are extremely interesting and a fruitful field for further exploration.

Christianity has particular implications for women since role reversal is a salient feature of the liminal period.

While it is impossible to prove conclusively that celibacy for men or women was a feature of the Reign of God movement, it remains a far from unlikely possibility.

(b) Women's Asceticism in the Earliest Communities: Corinth.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written around 54 CE, provides the earliest direct evidence for women's asceticism in early Christianity. The letter was written in response to a number of issues which had arisen in the community, including that of asceticism, as revealed in 1 Cor 7:1-40. Paul's aim is to tone down the enthusiasm of the community without denying the benefits of sexual continence.⁶⁴

Four variations of asceticism were being practised at Corinth – continence within marriage (7:3-5); separation from spouses, either Christian or pagan (7:10, 13); not remarrying after widowhood; and remaining virginal. Paul recommends that people remain in the state in which they were when they became Christian (7:17-24), yet though he indicates it is no sin to marry (7:28), his preference for continence surfaces. By describing sexual continence as a special charism from God, with which he himself has been blessed (7:7), Paul sets a standard which goes a long way toward explaining the subsequent popularity of asceticism as the preferred option for both men and women who chose to follow the Christian way of life.

Paul's reasoning in part echoes that of the Cynic teachers in lamenting the cares and obligations of the married state,⁶⁵ but adds a different element with the twin motifs of eschatology and service. He states that the appointed time is very short, so that the married should live as though they are unmarried (7:29), and additionally that the unmarried, being free from the demands of a spouse, are better able to serve the Lord (7:32-35). He also enjoins intermittent abstinence by the married so as to devote themselves to prayer (7:5) – a practice far from uncommon in both Judaism and pagan religion.

The wider context of 1 Corinthians reveals that a significant proportion of the Corinthian Christians believed that they were already fully enjoying the spiritual benefits of the resurrection – as evidenced by the attitude of freedom from earthly norms (5:1-8; 6:12-20), an excessive interest in some spiritual gifts (chap 14) and an apparent contempt for

64. See Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian women prophets: a reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) chapter 4.

65. Pheme Perkins, "Marriage in the New Testament and its world", in William P. Roberts (ed.), *Commitment to partnership: explorations of the theology of marriage* (New York: Paulist, 1987) 19. See also Pseudo Crates, 7, "Cynic Epistles", in *Ascetic behaviour in Greco-Roman antiquity*, 127.

those with lesser gifts (chap 12).⁶⁶ The decision for asceticism may well have arisen from the common Jewish belief that in the resurrection all become like the angels, neither male nor female (Mark 12:18-27 and parallels). At the same time, it becomes a powerful symbolic statement of the group's separation from the remainder of society as people of God, rejecting the carnality of the world.⁶⁷

David Balch argues that the origins of the Corinthian community's preference for radical asceticism originated in their prophetic charism. It stemmed from their understanding of certain Q passages, sayings very much like those in Luke 14:20, 26-27; 17:27; 18:29-30 and 20:34-35, which Paul is evidently trying to refute in 1 Cor 7, as well as their interpretation of the Philonic exegesis of Exod 34 which presents Moses as leading an ascetic lifestyle from the moment of his call to be a prophet so as to be always open to the oracular messages.⁶⁸ Greek culture undoubtedly also influenced the Corinthians' outlook by concurring with this belief. The thesis that asceticism was associated with women's prophesying among the early Christians is supported by Acts 21:9, the passing reference to the unmarried daughters of Philip, who prophesied, and Anna the widowed prophetess noted above (Luke 2:36-38).

Since the type of prophecy practised at Corinth was of the ecstatic type, women were probably the leading, though not the only, prophets for reasons noted above in the discussion on Hellenistic prophecy. This argument is strengthened by the fact that a close reading of 1 Cor 7 reveals that the thrust of Paul's argument is aimed at powerful celibate women, including consecrated virgins, whose sexual continence is connected to their roles of prophecy and ecstatic prayer in public worship.⁶⁹ Wire argues that these roles might be attributed to the less sexually defined state the women entered once they became celibate,⁷⁰ a situation reminiscent of the cultic privileges and responsibilities of the Vestals arising out of their indeterminate sexual status.

Precedents for the Corinthian women's chastity thus come directly out of the Græco-Roman world, which also includes Hellenistic Judaism, but they have applied existing tradition to a distinctly Christian situation by arguing that, as Wire puts it,

66. Jouette M. Bassler, "1 Corinthians", in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The women's Bible commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992) 321.

67. Wayne A. Meeks, *The first urban Christians: the social world of the apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 100-102.

68. D. L. Balch, "Backgrounds of 1 Cor. VII: sayings of the Lord in Q; Moses as an ascetic QEIOZ ANHP in II Cor. III", *New Testament studies* 18 (1972) 351-64.

69. See Wire, *The Corinthian women prophets* and Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Women holy in body and spirit: the social setting of 1 Corinthians 7", *New Testament studies* 36 (1990) 161-81.

70. Wire, *The Corinthian women prophets*, 65, 183.

God freely chooses to recreate humanity by raising Christ from the dead so that all who put on Christ, God's image, are no longer male and female, free and slave, Jew and Greek, but are people filled with God's spirit – that alone knows God – and become channels of this spirit to others.⁷¹

Might the anthropology which saw the virgin, or at least celibate, woman as spiritually male also be operating here? Although this is nowhere explicitly mentioned in any of Paul's correspondence, Lone Fatum, in her provocative article "Women, symbolic universe and structures of silence: challenges and possibilities in androcentric texts",⁷² argues that this was indeed the hidden agenda for women. She contends that this anthropology is not only implicit, but fundamental, in Gal 3:28, traditionally considered the classic text for radical equality in Christ. Arguing that the issue at stake in Galatians is those (male) members of the community who would separate themselves from Christ by succumbing to pressure from a strongly Judaizing group to be circumcised, she states that Galatians nowhere gives reason to believe that Paul is at all concerned with the circumstances of women.

What is usually taken as a statement of liberation and affirmation for women in the here and now, Fatum argues, is an eschatological assertion, liberating and affirming only males in the immediate context. Her reasoning lies in the androcentric implications of verse 28d. Only the male can grow and develop in the likeness of Christ. For women, this implies the spiritually male – those whose gender is annulled through asceticism and virginity. Those seemingly independent women who served as Paul's co-workers were, according to Fatum, leading lives of eschatologically qualifying asceticism, having been accepted on androcentric terms as sons and brothers.

Was this anthropology operating at Corinth? Was it so obvious and generally accepted that it did not have to be articulated?

(c) The Community of the Pastoral Epistles

The Pastoral Epistles represent another strand of Christianity, one which used Paul's name in "an attempt to use the authority of Paul against the ascetic socially and politically radical Christian groups who claimed Paul as their hero".⁷³ The fact that the writing is prescriptive makes the Pastorals, particularly 1 Timothy, ideally suited to the application of a feminist hermeneutic in order to reconstruct the lives of women.

71. Wire, *The Corinthian women prophets*, 184.

72. Lone Fatum, "Women, symbolic universe and structures of silence: challenges and possibilities in androcentric texts", *Studia theologica* 43 (1989) 61-80.

73. Joanna Dewey, "1 Timothy", in *The women's Bible commentary*, 354.

A reading against the grain of the text reveals that 1 Timothy was produced by a male-dominated (but not necessarily all male) group which was in conflict with the asceticism and egalitarianism of a second group which contained a significant number of powerful women (1 Tim 2:11-15, 4:1-5). Important for the study of the history of women's asceticism in the early Church is that 1 Tim 5:3-16 provides the earliest evidence for another category of ascetic women, the order of widows which became so prominent in the second and third centuries.⁷⁴ Where did this originate?

Concern for the welfare of widows is typically Jewish, but the widows in 1 Timothy are a far cry from the passive models of tradition. While choosing widowhood as an active vocation in preference to remarriage quite probably resulted from Pauline influence,⁷⁵ there also appears to have been some precedent in contemporary Judaism for consecrated widows. Judith is described as a holy widow, fasting and fearing God with great devotion (Judith 8:4-8), while the possibility of elderly, continent women at Qumran has been noted above. A precedent may also have been established in the Lucan community since Luke/Acts betrays quite an interest in widows and asceticism (see for example Luke 2:36-38; 7:11-17; 18:1-8; Acts 6:1; 9:39, 41 and Luke 16:18, Mark 5:32; Luke 18:29, Mark 10:29).

Whatever its origins, the tenor of 1 Tim 5:3-16 indicates that the author is attempting to bring under male control an established group of women who have been formally enrolled in a ministry for widows (v 9) by setting firm limits on the ages, family situation and piety of the women. Requiring younger widows to remarry ensures that they will not qualify as "real" widows in the future since these were to be wives of one man only (v 9).⁷⁶ Economic exigencies are given as the reason for this limitation, since the church had to support the widows (v 16). Or was there more to it?

Underlying the rhetoric Jouette Bassler has identified an ever growing group of not only widows, but also virgins and, possibly, divorced converts for whom a life of celibacy, though circumscribed like that of the Vestal virgins, also granted much greater freedom than that experienced by ordinary women under the rigidly patriarchal mores of contemporary society.⁷⁷ Not only did they enjoy freedom from the

74. See Jean Laporte, *The role of women in early Christianity*, *Studies in women and religion*, Vol. 7 (New York: The Edwin Mellin Press, 1982) 58-70, for further information on regulations concerning the order in the *Apostolic tradition* and the *Didascalia apostolorum*.

75. Seim, "Ascetic autonomy?", 130.

76. Lucinda Brown, "Asceticism and ideology: the language of power in the Pastoral Epistles", *Semeia* 57 (1992) 85-6.

77. Jouette Basler, "The widows' tale: a fresh look at 1 Tim 5:3-16", *Journal of biblical literature* 103 (1984) 34-6. The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrneans provides supporting evidence for the theory that virgins had joined the widows in an order of celibate women, in that among the groups to whom Ignatius sends greetings are "the virgins who are

control of husband and father, and from the demands of children, but they also had financial support and the esteem of the church, or at least a section of it.⁷⁸ Furthermore, evidence for celibate women living together in a communal household separate from the patriarchal household is provided by 1 Tim 5:16, which intimates that wealthy women in the community provided just such a service for their sisters.⁷⁹

That significant numbers of women in this community had decided that an ascetic lifestyle was both desirable and feasible is thus attested by this passage.⁸⁰ Attempts at control here and in 2:9-15 indicate the extent of the threat which these women posed to those who would assert male-only leadership. In fact, one of the primary thrusts of the Pastorals as a whole is to get women back into their subordinate position in the household.

1 Timothy, written some two generations after 1 Corinthians, presents a picture of women's asceticism which both resembles and differs from the earlier letter. The rhetoric of 1 Tim 2:11-15 indicates that celibate women's activity in worship is again one of the chief complaints against them, but it is their teaching and assumption of authority over men which are causing the difficulties. Ecstatic prophecy does not seem to be a feature of this group, though the desirability of sexual abstinence for a life of prayer continues to be recommended. Public prayer is again a bone of contention. Widows are exhorted to pray constantly, but in private (5:5); only men are permitted to pray in public (2:8).

The women appear to be much more organised and supportive of one another, to the extent that some live in community, and they are also busy in pastoral ministry outside of worship (5:13). Celibacy certainly would have made more time available for the community work suggested here, but 5:10 suggests that it was by no means a prerequisite. The problem appears to be that lack of domestic constraints has made it possible for community work and instruction in Christianity to become a way of life, and moreover, one that has earned considerable support. Otherwise why the bitter invective of 5:13, the accusations of idleness, gadding about from house to house, gossiping, busyboding and saying what they should not say?⁸¹

The text suggests that freedom to serve God, and freedom from male domination rather than the purity requirements of the prophet were the women's prime motivations. Questioning the social and cultural context of the community brings other possibilities to light. What, for

called widows"; see "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrneans", *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, 92..

78. Basler, "The widows' tale", 36.

79. Joanna Dewey, "1 Timothy", in *The women's Bible commentary*, 357.

80. Seim, "Ascetic autonomy?" 130.

81. Brown, "Asceticism and ideology", 85.

instance, did these women know of the dedication of virgins to Isis? Were some inspired by this model? Was the Hellenistic concept of the virgin as spiritually male influential here? Or was their situation much more mundane? Was celibacy, for many women, something that happened by default rather than intent, because of a preponderance of female converts over male and an unwillingness to marry, or remain married to, pagans?⁸² Once they realised the advantages of a celibate lifestyle, did other women follow suit, maybe from somewhat less exalted motives than those which first inspired their sisters?

CONCLUSIONS

A common pattern of events appears to have emerged in both communities under investigation. Asceticism had been freely chosen by some of the women in the community, for reasons that evidently had to do with their participation in worship as spiritual equals, whether in prayer, prophecy, teaching or assuming authority (leadership roles?). Their consequent rise in status became the focus of division in the community, as they were increasingly considered to be flouting socially and culturally acceptable standards of female behaviour at the very time when conformity to social norms was coming to be seen by some as necessary for coexistence in the outside world. Both men and non-celibate women would have been found among their supporters and detractors. None of this denies the existence of male celibacy, but this was not a problem because it did not cause social disruption.

Initial motivations need to be distinguished from those factors which encouraged ascetic women to continue, despite growing opposition, and which in turn motivated other women to join them. These were temporal as well as spiritual. That increasing numbers of women came to regard an ascetic lifestyle as desirable and rewarding, whether spiritually or temporally, is attested by second-century texts, notably the Apocryphal *Acts*. That they continued to create difficulties is attested by any number of male-authored texts attempting to impose control during succeeding centuries.

The limited nature of the source material means that any conclusions concerning the origins of Christian women's asceticism in the earliest communities must necessarily take the form of informed speculation rather than incontrovertible fact. Despite this, some order can be imposed on the complex mix of Hellenism, Judaism and early Christianity which comprises that chaotic bundle of threads. Græco-Roman and Jewish purity requirements for prophecy and prayer are both highly significant, while the example of the virgins dedicated to Isis and

82. Karl Suso Frank, *With greater liberty: a short history of Christian monasticism and religious orders* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1993) 27.

the philosophical assessment of the virgin as spiritually male also remain likely motives for women's celibacy. Tantalisingly these threads defy untangling, due to lack of further evidence.

Within early Christianity, Paul's example undoubtedly inspired both men and women, and words of Jesus whether originally recommending celibacy or not, were interpreted that way by later generations. Women's asceticism was facilitated by the liminal character of early Christianity which saw a temporary overturning of societal mores in what was to have been an interim period between Jesus' departure and his return to establish the Reign of God in its fullness. Women benefited during this period, embracing celibacy and taking on roles in worship which seem to have depended on sexual continence and the ambivalent sexual status so conferred. Community service outside worship, while not necessarily dependent on continence, was certainly facilitated by it. Once established, the tradition of women's asceticism took on a life and momentum of its own, despite concerted and continuing efforts at control as patriarchy was reasserted.