Women in Early Christianity: Pagan Precedence and Evangelical Acceptance

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WOMEN IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY:
PAGAN PRECEDENCE AND EVANGELICAL ACCEPTANCE

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Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ child and son of the virgin Mary, is believed to have preached the word of God from c. 26 AD until his crucifixion by the Romans in Judea between 30-33 AD. The followers that survived him documented and spread his teachings and the story of his life throughout the Jewish Diaspora and the Greco-Roman world, however the evidence they have provided regarding the acceptance, responsibilities, power, and prominence of women is often conflicting. Scholars have dissected the extant sources, scriptural and otherwise, and have concluded that women played a substantial role in early Christianity, and were able to wield a significant amount of power and influence from the time of Christ until well after the fall of the Roman empire in the year 476. Why were women able to do this? Chapter 1 begins to answer this question by outlining the daily lives of women in the patriarchal society of the Greco-Roman and Jewish world, and then considers specific examples of both Jesus and Paul welcoming women to participate in the faith as equals to men. Chapter 2 then shows the established precedent of women acting in powerful roles in pre-Christian religion, demonstrating that women were accepted into high profile positions in part because they had occupied similar positions in pagan religions prior to converting to Christianity. Chapter 3 shows that once women had been pushed to the margins of Christianity and were gradually becoming excluded from the priesthood, they were able to maintain their power and influence over those around them by acting as martyrs.
Chapter 1
Women in the Patriarchy – Jesus’ and Paul’s Opinions

Christianity developed largely within the confines of the patriarchal world of the Roman Empire, beginning in 63 BC with the reign of Augustus Caesar up until its demise in the late 5th century. Within this empire, women were not allowed a significant amount of scope or agency compared to their male counterparts. In stark contrast to the patriarchal views of Greco-Roman and Jewish society, Christianity espoused a more egalitarian attitude. Jesus and Paul advocated for the equality of God’s children, thus supporting a woman’s ability to make her own choices so long as they were meant to serve and/or strengthen her relationship with God. Overall, it was this egalitarianism which attracted women to Christianity in droves, and their substantial membership, in addition to their equal opportunity, is in part how women came to play such a sizeable role in, and hold so much power and influence over the early Church.

This chapter will begin by establishing the bounds of the patriarchal Greco-Roman and Jewish societies which women were a part of. There is ample surviving evidence to describe the daily lives of pagan women living within the Roman Empire. Sources describing the lives of Jewish women at the time are less plentiful and generally less detailed and complete, but are sufficient to suggest they did not live so differently from their non-Jewish peers. This examination of women’s roles within the Roman Empire will make apparent the attractiveness of life as a Christian woman compared to that of a pagan or Jew. This discussion will be followed by a look at the roles Jesus allowed women to
play in his close circle, and those Paul allowed them to play in his mission work to demonstrate the egalitarian nature of early Christianity relative to the previously discussed Greco-Roman milieu.

Pagan Roman women’s position in the patriarchy is evident from childhood. A child’s socialization into Roman society was achieved through formal education and model influence. The concurrence of these two modes was necessary to instill the various virtues needed for children to grow into fine representatives of their families. Formal schooling used a curriculum of language, philosophy, literature, and rhetorical training to imbue young boys with a sense of reason, self-control, justice, and courage, all of which would aid them in their future careers and as keepers of their households (paterfamilias).\textsuperscript{1} Virtues laid out in the classroom were then exemplified in the home to demonstrate what it looked like to use them and stress the importance of doing so. The use of education and exemplification to instill important virtues was used similarly to socialize young girls into the patriarchy, however the educational aspect was not so clear cut.

Elementary schooling was designed to provide students with the skills needed to enter the school of rhetoric, which was closed to girls. The result, of course, was a curriculum which was directed at a male audience with little concern for the domestic affairs of young girls and the roles they would one day take as wives and mothers. Not only was such a curriculum often seen as useless for one who would not be expected to be actively engaged in civic affairs, it was also viewed as potentially detrimental to a girl’s ability to carry out
her familial responsibilities. It is known that women of the upper registers were generally well educated so they could be satisfying companions to their husbands and solid role models for their children, but there was no general consensus on how these women should receive this education, or in what subjects they should be educated in. The tone regarding the education of daughters is clearly exhibited in the works of several Roman authors who wrote down their thoughts as to the education of young girls. Works written by Martial between 86 and 103 AD suggest that academic materials for girls be carefully regulated so they “would not damage morals.” The kinds of works Martial believed were most suitable, then, were those few would see as having offensive or mature content. In the case of respected epics and tragedies that were “useful for cultivating a sense of proper conduct,” Martial was of the opinion they be saved for a slightly older audience. Several fathers likely agreed with Martial’s judgment, but it is just as likely that many were in disagreement, and felt the reading of fine epics and tragedies would help impart a sense of sophistication to their daughters’ taste. Taking a different approach than Martial, Musonius Rufus, who was an active philosopher between 60 and 101 AD, was a large proponent of the female intellect, and believed young girls were no less intellectually capable than young boys. Rather than providing daughters with a “safe” education compared to their male peers for the sake of maintaining their delicacy, Rufus argued that girls be instructed in the same subjects and in the same manner as boys. He reasoned that if they were as able to learn the material, they were equally able to absorb important virtues from it. In his work,
On Why Daughters Should Receive the Same Education as Sons, Rufus expressed his view that philosophy, specifically, was the single most important subject for daughters to study, because it would instill within them the foundational virtues of self-control, reason, justice, and courage. These four virtues were necessary for boys to grow into their fathers' shoes, but they were also quite necessary for daughters to become fine wives and mothers. Most notable of the four is the virtue of courage (andreia) — “A girl trained in andreia through the study of philosophy will be strengthened so that she can remain chaste in the face of a sexual threat and defend her future children from danger.” Rufus acknowledged the potential for some daughters to misuse their educational training and behave in such a way that was unbecoming of a proper woman, but in the hands of the right daughter, the benefit far outweighed the risk. “The best woman employs her training in philosophy not in an intellectual context, nor in pursuit of personal pleasure, but in her social roles, where she protects her identity as virginal daughter, chaste wife, or protective mother.”

Martial and Rufus tackled the issue of female education with a discussion of what they found to be the safest and most appropriate methods for teaching to ensure girls maintained proper behavior. These arguments, of course, assumed it is quite possible for education and modesty to coexist, but this belief was by no means shared by everyone. The poet Ovid, born in 43 BC and dying in 18 AD, represented a more pessimistic view that the coexistence of education and modesty was perhaps easier to discuss than achieve. Ovid used his poetry to depict girls and women who, by way of their education, have received the notion
that they are capable of and within their right to make their own decisions and to be highly visible in public. The results of these notions were ruinous for both the women in question and their families.⁷

In Tristia 3.7, Ovid cast himself as the father of a young maiden named Perilla. Perilla took to her studies with vigor and became so enamored with poetry that she decided to dedicate her every hour to her lessons rather than tending to her appearance and accepting the inappropriateness of her indulgence. Refusing to succumb to societal expectations, she continued to study throughout her youth and her marriageability slipped away along with her young face. Fated to remain unmarried and without children, Perilla assured herself she would not die so long as she were survived by her work. Ovid disagreed and declared her learning to be a pleasant waste of a life doomed to end along with the family line.⁸ More well-known, Ovid’s Metamorphoses tells the story of a daughter named Myrrha who had an incestuous relationship with her father. Myrrha was shown to publicly defend the love she and her father shared using elements from the controversia, a well-known speaking exercise reserved for boys in higher education. “In the simple act of delivering a genre of speech known for being tailored to the development of masculine virtue and the socialization of young men, Myrrha tramples the boundaries of virtuous girlhood.”⁹ The absurdity of Myrrha’s argument is enough to drive home the moral of the story:

Struggling to argue that amor between daughter and father is simply an elevated form of family affection, or pietas, Myrrha employs the masculine, controlling approach of the controversia, only to deploy it ineffectively
against an irrational and uncontrollable emotion. Myrrha's argument for incest, in which she justifies sexual relations between human parents and children as natural based on the behavior of animals, only reinforces the notion that educating a young female in the art of rhetoric is a mistake.\textsuperscript{10}

Considering Ovid’s argument that educated daughters are at risk of becoming inappropriately unreserved and unmarriageable, Rufus’ argument that education will give daughters the courage necessary to defend their morals, and Martial’s argument that girls should be spared the unseemly and offensive content for the sake of their purity, it is quite clear that the maintenance of a girl’s modesty was always a father’s highest priority when considering her education as a young maiden. To ensure that his daughter was marriageable, it was necessary for a father to rear a woman who was both learned enough to be intellectually stimulating to her husband and children, and feminine enough to behave in agreement with the societal expectations of a woman. A suitress who was academically deficient, or who consistently shirked her duties, would be seen as less or entirely (un)desirable. More undesirable still would have been a girl who was morally loose, or who lacked the courage to uphold her values when they were endangered.\textsuperscript{11} Because of this and the lack of consensus regarding the advisability and methods for providing daughters with a formal education, fathers considered the presence and influence of respectable women to be an invaluable socializing tool for their daughters.

Mothers and grandmothers spent a significant amount of time with their children and grandchildren to both teach and exemplify how they were to behave. By their hand, young girls were polished with a sense of poise, finesse and elegance, and became well versed in the art of grace. When they
approached marriageable age, they were taught how to tend to their appearance in addition to learning how to carry out the proper duties of a wife. Until they were married, however, it was paramount that they realize the significance of their virginity and the importance of protecting it. Among the greatest tools for the job in a mother’s or grandmother’s arsenal were pseudo-historical tales like that of Cloelia or Lucritia.\textsuperscript{12} The story of Cloelia was most relatable to girls as Cloelia was a young maiden herself. The story goes that when the city of Rome was under siege by the Etruscan King, Lars Porsenna, around the year 508 BC, Cloelia took it upon herself to gather up a number of the captured virgins and lead them across the Tiber while under Porsenna’s javelins. When the maidens were safely returned to their families unharmed and untouched, the Romans handed Cloelia over to Porsenna in exchange for a truce. Porsenna was so affected by Cloelia’s act of bravery, he allowed her to choose another lot of hostages to be returned to their homes. Cloelia, a heroine of girls and defender of virginity, chose among those hostages whose chastity had not been spoiled, and so were worth defending. The maidens were then restored to their families and a statue of Cloelia was erected along the Sacred Way in commemoration of her deeds.\textsuperscript{13} If Cloelia was the model maiden young girls should aspire to be, then Lucritia was certainly the model wife. Sextus Tarquinius, son of Rome’s king in 509 BC, and Tarquinius Collatinus, son of the king’s nephew, argued over a bottle of wine which of their wives was most honorable. They agreed to settle their argument with a surprise visit to their homes to see how their wives acted while they were away. While Tarquinius’ wife was found to be dining with their
friends, Collatinus' wife, Lucretia, was found dutifully wool-working with her servants in the home. Tarquinius was enamored by Lucretia and overcome with jealousy. He returned to Lucretia's home some days later and was welcomed as a guest. When the house had fallen asleep, he began to unfold his plan to forcibly take her, and entered Lucretia's chamber with his sword. He threatened Lucretia with death should she refuse him, but she would not succumb to fear. Frustrated by her conviction, Tarquinius told her he would not only kill her, but also kill one of her servants and place him in her bed for her disgrace.

Lucritia surrendered to his threat for the sake of her family's honor, and then called on her father and husband when Tarquinius had taken his leave. When her family arrived, each with one witness, Lucritia recounted the horrific event and declared that only her body and not her mind had been corrupted. Her father and husband then swore to avenge her and pardoned her shame, but Lucritia, revealing a knife she had concealed in her garments, exclaimed "although I absolve myself of guilt, I do not release myself from paying the penalty. From now on, no woman can use the example of Lucretia to live unchaste." Lucretia thrust the knife into her chest and fell dead. Young girls who heard Cloelia's story would have learned the significance of a girl's virginity prior to marriage. Similarly, girls would have admired Lucretia's message that death was more honorable than lying with someone other than their husband, regardless of the circumstance. Taken together, these tales taught daughters they ought to be reserved for their future husband and for him alone, else they risk their respect, their value, and ultimately their future. This was a daughter's
primary duty to her father and to her family. The average age at marriage among upper class girls was 14 – the usual age at which they began menstruating. It is at this time that a girl was seen as most vulnerable to her sexual desires, and so was given to her husband (or husband-to-be) to ensure that she experienced only him and, more importantly, to make certain any children born to her were legitimate. Marriages were arranged between the bride’s father and the groom’s father (although it was not uncommon for older men to arrange their own marriages in their father’s place), and were done so based upon political and financial interests that would enhance the status of the respective families. A bride could only refuse a suitor her father had chosen if she could prove that he was of unsound character, and was otherwise expected to accept him as her husband. This could be particularly traumatizing for daughters who were given to men significantly older than themselves, as was often the case. Girls were usually married to men at least five years older who had established themselves in their careers and were capable of supporting a wife. It is noteworthy here, however, that it was not infrequent for fathers to marry off their daughters long before they were of age due to their usefulness in creating familial alliances. While this was prohibited by Roman law, “jurists were not eager to trample on the ability of the paterfamilias to manage his household as he saw fit.”  

Once a maiden was married off, she took on the title of matron. She retained her primary position as a daughter, and also remained under her father and brother’s protection should her husband prove himself to be cruel or unfit, but added to her role as a daughter was her new responsibility to her husband –
to bear children. Roman wives found themselves to be in a near constant state of pregnancy throughout their fertile years. Statistically speaking, a mother would have had to birth five children so that two might live on to adulthood. The others were likely to be overcome by disease as small children, or to die in war or childbirth before they had grown to carry out their proper roles as their father's successor or as mothers.\(^{16}\) It was also widely held that a woman who was menstruating was sickly and at risk of losing control over her sexual desires, and thus it was in the best interest of both her health and modesty to be pregnant. While some physicians were acutely aware of the health problems associated with childbearing at a young age, they remained at odds with societal attitudes and pressures, and were reluctant to address the issue for the sake of their reputation. There were other esteemed physicians, of course, who showed no restraint in letting their own social bias seep into their true medical opinions.\(^{17}\) With fathers and husbands pressing young women to bear children and no medical authorities willing to take action against it, young wives became seriously afflicted, and their deaths were commonplace.

Women who did not die or become gravely ill from the birthing process could have also died or suffered from miscarrying (unintentionally or otherwise). Various invasive and non-invasive abortion methods were likely used in the case of accidental, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, but also served a husband and wife who did not have the means to care for another child. As an alternative, an unwanted child could have been carried to term and then exposed. It is noteworthy that infanticide was not reserved for poor families and illegitimate
children, and was in fact practiced widely among all classes in favor of sons over daughters. Where a son could grow up to have a successful career and inherit the *paterfamilias*, daughters were likely to remain dependent throughout their lives, were quite costly to care for, and thus were frequently seen as burdensome and unwanted. Exemplifying this is a letter a man named Hilarion wrote home to his wife - "I beg and beseech of you to take care of the little child, and as soon as we receive wages I will send them to you. If – good luck to you! – you bear offspring, if it is a male, let it live; if it is a female, expose it."\(^{18}\) Despite this outlook, it is clear that many fathers were pleased to keep their daughters, and it was perhaps this choice to do so that accounted for such loving father-daughter relationships, like that of the well-known Cicero and Tulia.

Aside from her new role as child bearer, the daily life of a wife was not so different from her life as a daughter. She carried out her chores around the home; cleaning, tending to her wool, and watching the children; and as ever before was expected to remain modest and chaste. Her loyalty to her husband was, as I have already stated, of the utmost importance, and she risked grave consequences if she decided to be unfaithful. The Julian marriage laws are illustrative of the unequal treatment of an adulterous wife compared to a husband. To begin, the majority of the laws discuss how a wife was to be punished according to the circumstances under which she was caught, however, there is very little mention of how to deal with adulterous husbands.

Either an adoptive or natural father is permitted to kill with his own hands an adulterer caught in the act with his daughter in his own house or in that of his son-in-law, no matter what his rank may be... A husband cannot kill
anyone taken in adultery except persons who are infamous, and those who sell their bodies for gain, as well as slaves. His wife, however, is excepted, and he is forbidden to kill her... After having killed the adulterer, the husband should at once dismiss his wife, and publicly declare within the next three days with what adulterer, and in what place he found his wife... A husband who does not at once dismiss his wife whom he has taken in adultery can be prosecuted as a pimp... Women convicted of adultery shall be punished with the loss of half of their dowry and the third of their goods, and by relegation to an island. The adulterer, however, shall be deprived of half his property, and shall also be punished by relegation to an island; provided the parties are exiled to different islands... Sexual intercourse with female slaves, unless they are deteriorated in value or an attempt is made against their mistress through them, is not considered an injury.\(^{19}\)

The sample above is representative of the constant concern over the fidelity of wives, and a lack thereof over husbands. While it would be foolish to believe that married men were not among those adulterers punished for their crimes by the husband or father of their mistress, it is clear the wording of the laws was meant to address unfaithful wives specifically. What is more, while a husband was permitted to kill a slave caught with his wife, “sexual intercourse with female slaves... is not considered an injury.” It is thus inferred that any man might have sex with female slaves so long as the slave was not “deteriorated in value.” Furthermore, despite the illegality of killing one’s wife after catching her with another man, jurists were of the opinion that the husband “should be punished more leniently, for the reason that he committed the act through impatience caused by just suffering.”\(^{20}\)

That the actions of women were always closely with predetermined punishments in anticipation of misconduct, speaks volumes about a Roman woman’s lack of freedom and autonomy. She was always a daughter under her
father's control, and for his gain, was expected to further subordinate herself to a husband to form a familial alliance and bear children to cement this alliance. It is quite evident that Roman women were of a secondary status under men, and were hardly allowed to demonstrate their intellectual capabilities or their potential to achieve accomplishments equal to those of men. That women were viewed as untrustworthy and incapable to stand on par with their fathers and husbands was also demonstrated in the appointment of guardians to watch over their behavior and their legal and financial affairs.

As outlined by the jurist Ulpian between 211 and 222 AD, a father would assign a guardian to his sons and daughters to watch over them in the event of his passing, but the son would automatically be freed from guardianship once he reached puberty and was thus capable of caring for himself. Daughters, however, would remain under guardianship "both under and over puberty, on account of the weakness of their sex as well as their ignorance of legal matters."21 The jurist Gaius (writing between 130 and 180 AD) states in addition that this guardianship remained in place "even when they are married... It is only under the Julian and Papian-Poppaean Acts that women are released from guardianship by the privilege of children."22 The acts Gaius was referring to were those established by Caesar Augustus in 18 BC in an attempt to correct the deteriorated morals of the Roman populace, and to increase the birthrate of Rome's elite class. A Roman woman who bore at least three children was freed from guardianship, and the same exemption applied to a freedwoman who bore four. Under the same laws, a woman who never married, was divorced, or had
been widowed without remarrying, or who was childless was banned from inheriting property.

Officially speaking, while a woman was to remain under guardianship and could be disqualified from inheriting property for various reasons, she did share in many of the same rights as her fellow man. What set her rights apart, however, was her ability to practice them without representation. In most legal situations, if a woman found herself needing to defend or act on her rights for any reason, she would be accompanied by a man (her father, brother, husband, or guardian). While this accompaniment was not always required by law, a lone woman would have been generally looked down on by those she had to deal with throughout the legal process. This is made evident by the case of Gaia Afrania, who represented herself without a guardian so frequently between 60 and 48 BC that she came to be seen as a mere aggravation and her name became a byword to describe women who attempted to act so brazenly and independently in public affairs.²³

The only public domain in which Roman women could openly participate without social consequence was that of religion. Women's participation in the state and mystery cult religions will be discussed in depth in chapter 2, but it is fitting to note here that the worship of the state gods and goddesses served to further reinforce a woman's proper role as a daughter, wife, and mother, within the confines of the Roman patriarchy.²⁴ The worship of the Greek goddesses Demeter and Persephone, for instance, which remained prominent from early Greek civilization through the age of the Roman empire, served to represent the
mother-daughter relationship and the painful separation they must endure when the daughter was married off at a young age by her father. In nearly every aspect, the lives and roles of Roman women were contoured to the patriarchy in which they lived. A daughter's role in the patriarchy was to marry a man of her father's choice so that he could maintain or enhance his financial, political, and social status; a wife's role in the patriarchy was to bear children to both continue her father's lineage and to provide her husband with legitimate successors to inherit his will; a mother's role in the patriarchy was to carefully rear her children so that they became well versed in how to perform their proper duties in society as men and women to continue the cycle. Overall, from the beginning to the end, the life experiences of a Roman woman were carefully watched over to ensure they helped her ability to carry out her proper roles, and the result was a life of relatively little scope, agency, or autonomy.

The abundance of reliable primary sources regarding Roman women and the relative ease with which scholars have been able to paint an accurate picture of their daily lives is a true luxury compared to the scant sources and study of Jewish women throughout the Diaspora. Surviving literary evidence of Jewish women, like the writings of Josephus (c. 75-94 AD), Philo of Alexandria (c. 40 AD), or Nicolaus of Damascus (c. 1-15 AD), was not written with women as the focus, and thus does not seem to show much concern for representing them with accuracy or in any form of completeness. Fortunately, archaeological findings have begun both to supplement and fill the void left by these Jewish scholars and philosophers, and have provided the most reliable representations of the lives of
Jewish women to date. From these sources, we can deduce that the circumstances of Jewish women were not so different from those of their non-Jewish counterparts in the pre-Christian era.

Combining the literary sources and available archaeological evidence has given scholars a nearly complete picture of two affluent Jewish women who together serve to demonstrate the similarities between Jewish and Roman women in the time of the early empire. The first woman, identified most extensively by Josephus, was Berniece of the Herodian family, daughter of King Herod Agrippa I. Berniece’s early life was not documented. She made her first appearance as the wife of an elite Jewish man named Marcus Julius Alexander, and was subsequently married off to her father’s brother, Herod, after Marcus’ death. She had two sons with Herod, and then at age 22, was widowed for the second time. After Herod’s death, Berniece ruled alongside her brother, Herod Agrippa II, for a number of years before taking a third husband on her own accord. This husband was then cast aside in favor her next infatuation - a Roman general named Titus. Berniece followed Titus to Rome, but because she was unwelcomed by the Roman aristocracy, she was soon sent away. She attempted to return after Titus had become the emperor, but he refused her advances and ended their affair. She died in 81 AD. The second woman identified in the historical record is Babatha, whose personal legal documents were discovered in a cave near the dead sea and date to the 2nd century AD. Like Berniece, Babatha’s childhood was not documented, but it is known that her parents were well-to-do as they left her a substantial amount of their
property. Babatha's papers dictate that she was married twice – first to a man named Jesus with whom she had one son, and later to a man named Judah. Judah was married to a woman named Miriam when he took Babatha as his second wife in a polygynous marriage, and it appears Babatha managed to develop a close relationship with her new step-daughter, Shelamzion, which is evidenced by her funding of her dowry. The last of Babatha's documents are related to disputes over Judah's property after his death.  

Babatha's life experiences were closer to the Jewish standard than those of Berniece. The majority of Jewish people were not Roman citizens or of highly prominent families like the Herodian family, and thus were largely second class, uneducated peoples. Babatha, for instance, despite all her wealth, was "without letters." These circumstances were no different among non-Jews of the same social standing in the empire. In the realm of marriage, also not unlike their pagan counterparts, daughters between twelve and eighteen years (late teenage years for the less affluent) were married off by their fathers to much older men and expected to rear children. That Babatha's documents explicitly identify her as a virgin before her marriage to Jesus indicate that virginity prior to first marriage was also of equal importance. These marriages often ended with the wife's death during childbirth, though they ended just as frequently with the death of the husband. Due to the age difference between a wife and her first husband, women could usually expect to be widowed (often more than once), and women were generally afforded more say in the choice of their next husband(s), especially if they were nearing the end of their childbearing years.
To further demonstrate that Jewish and non-Jewish women had very similar lives in the Roman empire, Jewish women’s participation in religious activities was among the few ways in which they could stand out in public, although the extent to which they could do so varied considerably from place to place. For instance, women were required to bring offerings to the second temple in Jerusalem, but were denied participation in sacrifices. The second temple also was divided into sections that limited who could enter. Josephus tells us that the first section was open to everyone (including non-Jews), although menstruating women were considered to be impure and were barred from entrance. The second section was closed to non-Jews and remained closed to menstruating women. The third was for men alone, and the final section was reserved for priests. However, the limits placed upon women at the temple in Jerusalem do not necessarily translate into their exclusions elsewhere. According to Kraemer, although leaders of the synagogues, known as archisynagogos, were most often men, several Jewish women are known to have risen to this position. Kraemer goes on to note:

Other inscriptions identify women as members of the council of elders (gerousia), the members of which may have functioned similarly to boards of directors in modern synagogues. Still others demonstrate that women were significant financial contributors to synagogues. One important inscription bestows the privilege of sitting in the seat of honor in the synagogue on a woman named Tation in recognition of her great generosity.\textsuperscript{30}

The notion that Jewish women were severely oppressed by the teachings of Judaism and Jewish culture (more so than their pagan counterparts in Roman society as a whole) largely stems from a slew of Christian feminist scholarship.
seeking to portray Judaism as inherently misogynistic and unfavorable to women when compared to Christianity. The sources most often used as evidence for the unfortunate lives of Jewish women living at the time of Christ include the Mishnah and the Talmud of Babylon and Israel. These sources are thought to have been written by rabbis who also lived around the time of Christ. However, their historical credibility must be questioned for various reasons. To begin with, the teachings comprising the Mishnah were not put together until 200 CE, and the Babylonian Talmud and the Talmud of Israel were not assembled until the fifth century CE at the earliest. Moreover, as Kraemer points out -

It is by no means certain that the attribution of a given saying, or a certain tale, to a particular rabbi is historically reliable. Nor is it generally possible to verify either the historicity of a particular rabbi or any of the limited (and sometimes conflicting) biographical data scattered throughout rabbinic traditions about various rabbis.31

Despite the dangers of taking such sources as being representative of their time, it is sometimes all too tempting to accept them at face value, especially when they fall so clearly in line with the argument one is trying to make. Kraemer revokes the image of helpless Jewish women so often depicted by Christian scholars, who claim that these women were oppressed by virtue of being Jewish rather than by virtue of being women in a patriarchal world in general. Instead, she re-examines the parallels between the rabbinic sources that supposedly represent the oppressive nature of Judaism as a whole and the writings of the New Testament, which have been used by contrast to represent Christ as a rescuer of Jewish women. She concludes that both contain elements
of misogyny that, when accepted at face value, suggest Christ treated women no differently than his Jewish peers. It should be noted that some Jewish scholars today view the Talmud and the Mishnah in the same light as Jewish scripture, and consider their content to provide a credible representation of what Jewish life was like. However, acceptance of these writings by Jewish scholars is partly why some have little issue with considering them as equally factual when attempting to prove the validity of their own arguments against Judaism. The problem, of course, is not whether these sources can be taken as factual so much as it is a problem of biased research.

To investigate one particular example of Jewish men's (supposedly) overly oppressive behavior compared to that of Christ, it has been argued that, based on the Mishna, Jewish men were to refrain from conversing with Jewish women. There are variations of this argument, some saying that Jewish men "'maintained a prudent silence' with women," and others saying that men should only avoid talking with married women. It cannot be said for sure if men actually avoided talking with women, but examples of Jesus' conversations in the New Testament could easily be seen as supporting evidence that conversations with women were to be avoided, and that Christ accepted and agreed with this behavior.

Excluding resurrection appearances, Jesus speaks directly to women in twelve episodes in the canonical gospels. Four are unique to Luke; one is unique to Matthew; three are unique to John... In almost every instance, Jesus' conversation with women is terse and fits easily within the rabbinic notion of limited speech with women, particularly married women. In all three synoptics (Mark 5:34//Matt 9:22//Luke 8:48), Jesus says to the hemorrhaging woman, 'daughter, your faith has saved you (from your disease)'. To the widowed mother in Nain (Luke 7:11-17), Luke's Jesus says exactly two words: 'Don't cry'... To the woman who anoints him,
Matthew's and Mark's Jesus says nothing, but Luke's Jesus says (Luke 7:50) just what he says to the hemorrhaging woman.  

In the scant scenes that show Jesus holding more lengthy discussions with women (such as his discussion in John 4:7-30 with the Samaritan woman), it must be noted that they are frequently not Jewish. What is more, none of the women Jesus speaks to (briefly or otherwise) are expressed as being married. This brief comparison of Jesus as presented in the new testament to Jewish men according to rabbinic sources is perhaps evidence that Jesus treated women no differently than others in Jewish society. It must be reiterated here, however, that the point of this comparison is to discredit the anti-Semitically biased research claiming that Jewish women were more oppressed than other women of their time, and the notion that Jewish women were eager to free themselves from this oppression through Jesus. Overall, these sources, while they are crucial to research, must always be considered carefully and fairly when compared to other evidence.

Before we can move forward, further observations need to be made using the information regarding women found in the New Testament. It has already been stated that the women of the New Testament were not expressly depicted as wives, but what is more, we see a widowed mother grieving her afflicted son, a woman who has been bent over hemorrhaging for twelve years, and a woman who is explicitly identified as non-Jewish. These three women from this one example serve as a representative sample of women in the Jesus movement, which was largely comprised of anomalous or marginal women and those who
were non-Jewish. Additional examples can be seen in Jesus' close circle, such as the unmarried Martha of Bethany and Mary of Magdala. Significantly, there appears to be a great lack of Jewish women in the Jesus movement who are married with children, and there appears to be an equal absence of Jewish women of high status and wealth, especially compared to the number of pagan women who joined the following through Paul. In fact, when contrasted with pagan women, there are relatively few Jewish women in the Jesus movement in general, marginal or otherwise. As Kraemer has observed:

The entire New Testament identifies something like forty women by name. Of these... approximately twelve named women are associated with the movement during Jesus' lifetime: these include Johanna; five or perhaps six women named Mary...; Martha of Bethany; Salome; and Susanna... In Luke's account of the followers of Jesus who continued the movement after his death, a small number of Jewish women are mentioned who may or may not have been followers of Jesus in his lifetime and who round out my list of about a dozen: the less than exemplary Sapphira,... the more exemplary widow, Tabitha...; and the formidable Pricilla... Apart from these three, of the named women associated with the Jesus movement in the decades after his death, none is explicitly or demonstrably Jewish... On the contrary, many of these women appear unlikely to have been Jews by virtue of their names, their geographic locations, and perhaps also their association with churches affiliated with Paul, the self-described apostle to the Gentiles.

It is not entirely clear why Roman pagans found Jesus to be so much more attractive than their Jewish peers, but Kraemer speculates that the acceptance or rejection of Jesus' message based upon prior religious affiliation could have merely been a difference in perception to the conquering Romans and the conquered Jews. The answer to this question can only be guessed at, but what can be said definitively is that the women who did seek to join Jesus'
close following were those who were mentally or physically suffering, had neglected their proper roles in the patriarchy, and were thus outcasts of society. That is to say, the women who sought after Jesus were those who needed something from him, or the community around him.

It is difficult to elucidate details of the lives of individual women in Jesus' close circle based upon their portrayal in the gospels by the various authors. This is in part because the authors of the gospels were primarily focused on explaining the life and death of Jesus Christ and on relaying his message in a way attractive to the community. Therefore, according to Mary D'Angelo, the various characters and stories in the gospels which were added to supplement and reinforce these explanations of Christ differed depending on the time and place at which they were written, and most importantly, on the bias of the author.36

The gospel of Mark is generally accepted as the earliest of the four canonical gospels in the New Testament, and was written either in Galilee, Syria, or Rome, around the fall of the second Jewish temple in 70 CE. The composition of the gospel of Mark thus took place roughly forty years after Jesus was crucified, and possibly far removed from where Jesus and his close followers were actually located, and in an area that may have had different views on gender. The Gospel of John is believed to have been written in several stages even longer after the crucifixion, having been penned between 90 and 110 AD. Not only do the various authors of John contradict one another in their portrayal of women throughout the text, they also differ from Mark substantially. For
example, they tell very different stories about Mary Magdalene and her presence at tomb and resurrection of Jesus, and thus produce different arguments regarding Mary's importance. Further discrepancies can be seen when comparing the gospel of Mark and the gospel of John with that of Mary, which was written near the end of the first or start of the second century CE.

In Mark's gospel, Mary Magdalene makes her first appearance watching Jesus' death from afar. Mark describes her as a disciple by saying she was one of the women who had "followed" and "provided for" Jesus. The term diekonoun in the Greek translation (translated as "provided for") also meant "to minister," both in a serving sense and in a teaching sense (it has also been suggested that this Greek term was similar to another in Hebrew which was used to identify someone as an apprentice who served their master until it was their turn to inherit his role. Mary makes her second appearance in Mark at Jesus' burial and is again watching from a distance. Her final appearance comes when she and her two female companions discover the empty tomb, and are instructed by "a youth" to tell the other disciples that Jesus will be in Galilee - a message the women never deliver.

The author of John introduces Mary at Jesus' death, just as the author of Mark, however the similarities stop there. When Mary discovers the empty tomb, she was alone, and immediately ran to Peter and the unnamed beloved disciple, exclaiming that the tomb had been robbed. The three of them returned to the tomb for inspection, and when the two men left, Mary met two angels who asked her to re-explain the meaning of what she saw. Her meeting with the angels was
followed by her meeting with Jesus, whom she mistook for the gardener. She recognized him when he said her name, and upon trying to embrace him, he told her, "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I ascend to my father and your father, to my God and your God.'" Mary then returned to the disciples to proclaim that she had seen the Lord and to relay his message.

The Gospel of Mark does not show Mary as a witness of the resurrected Christ at the tomb. Instead, the message Mary receives from the youth, "Jesus proceeds them into Galilee," suggests that Jesus intended only to appear to Peter and the eleven in the future. John, on the other hand, depicts Mary as both the sole discoverer of the empty tomb and the only witness to his resurrection - the phrase "he is risen" implying no future appearances to the others. Interestingly, while this one author of John made further appearances to the disciples unnecessary, the later author added three more, seemingly with the purpose of playing down Mary's role.

It is possible that 20:19-31 was added precisely to undercut the impression that the definitive interpretation of Jesus' departure was delivered only through a woman. Even more notably, the appendix to the gospel, which was probably supplied by a later member of the community specifically to define the relative roles of Peter and the beloved disciple, does not mention Mary Magdalene. Further, John 21:14 counts the appearance on the sea of Galilee as 'the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples,' apparently excluding the appearance to Mary, perhaps because the author of the appendix did not wish to include her in that category.

The Gospel of Mary, possibly written in the 3rd century AD appears to pick up where John's first author left off in sending Mary to the disciples with Jesus'
final message. In the gospel of Mary, she successfully relayed Jesus’s message, but was questioned by Peter and Andrew. Peter demanded she recount her revelation to them, and upon doing so, Peter and Andrew both rejected her. Andrew claimed the message sounded unlike something Jesus would have said, and Peter was unable to fathom the thought of Jesus speaking to Mary in private and entrusting her, a woman, with such an important message. Mary was immediately defended by Levi, who accused Peter’s questioning of being adversarial. Levi then supported Mary’s claim, stating that Jesus “knew her completely [and] loved her devotedly.”

Mary Magdalene was undoubtedly one of Jesus’s closest disciples and was a very influential member of the Jesus movement. Indeed, even the gospel writings that attempt to argue against her seem to suggest she was in a powerful position that perhaps intimidated or incited jealousy in the men around her. Why would a man go out of his way to deny the authority of a woman if it was not there to begin with? Would a woman be so boldly recognized as the apostle among and to the (male) apostles if she had in fact not earned the title? The case of Mary Magdalene is certainly an interesting one. Mary’s story serves to represent what positions Jesus accepted for women in his following, while also speaking to the patriarchal society at large which tried so hard to denigrate her, or at the very least, put her in her place below the male disciples.

That there was a woman named Mary who was of a notable rank among Jesus’ closest allies is apparent, but it is important to reiterate that the persons written into the gospels were placed there for various purposes to reach various
people, and their stories were told accordingly to ensure these purposes were met. Nevertheless, the fact that so many women are named as having been accepted by Jesus into his close circle regardless of their backgrounds, and that at least one of these women surely out-ranked the vast majority of women and men alike, is demonstrative of why Jesus was so attractive to women as a whole. Certainly they were intrigued by the rumors of his power and sought him out for that purpose. But more importantly, Jesus' acceptance of these women exhibited his willingness to forgive them for having transgressed the patriarchal standards when no one else would. Where these women were unmarried, without families or children, were injured or sick, and had been completely cast aside by the world, Jesus was not only willing to accept and forgive them, but also to build them up to their greatest potential as one of God's children alongside their fellow men.

After Jesus' crucifixion, his disciples were left responsible for spreading the faith in his place, but there was great contention among them regarding who was allowed to be saved, and who was not. Paul and his companion, Barnabas, sailed to Antioch to address the issue. They called the church together and spoke of the Gentiles they had introduced to the faith, but were opposed by men from Judea who exclaimed "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved (Acts 15:1)." Paul and Barnabas then traveled to Jerusalem to argue again for the conversion of the Gentiles, and after a long debate, convinced the apostles and elders gathered there that it was God's decision to save the Gentiles, for they would not have been granted the gift of
faith had the Lord not willed it himself. With the apostles and elders in
agreement, Paul set out as the self-proclaimed apostle of the Gentiles, and
began converting men and women to Christianity in mass numbers, allowing both
to take on whatever roles and responsibilities they had the desire or the means to
carry out.

Paul’s acceptance of women in prominent positions is demonstrated at
Romans 16:1 where he introduced the Christians in Rome to a woman named
Phoebe. He referred to her as “the diakonos of the churches in Cenchreae and
the prostatis of many and of Paul himself.” Diakonos is a title used for those
“who taught, preached, rendered a variety of spiritual services to newly formed
Christian communities, and possessed an ample amount of authority and
leadership status within such communities.” Phoebe’s second title of prostatis
“suggests a public role of patronage and protection,” implying not only that she
had an abundance of wealth and autonomy, but also that Paul accepted these
things about her as an individual. Further exemplifying Paul’s recognition and
acceptance of women’s power and influence in his Christianizing pursuits was a
woman named Prisca, who along with her husband, Aquila, was identified as one
of Paul’s personal coworkers, or synergos. Commenting on this text, Elizabeth
Castelli observed:

The Greek term used here is synergos, which Paul uses elsewhere in
relation to both centrally important colleagues like Timothy (Rom 16:21; 1
Thess 3:2) and Apollos (1 Cor 3:9) and less well known participants in the
work of the early Christian mission (Rom 16:9; Phil 2:25; Phlm
1:24). Although it is not entirely clear what it would mean for anyone to be
a synergos, it is clear that it is a position to which Paul accords a
significant amount of importance and respect... Prisca’s presence among
those who are called *synergoi* allows us to conclude that some women participated centrally in the framing and enactment of early Christian missionary activity. That Paul simply calls Prisca a *synergos* without any further comment suggests that her presence is, in important respects, unremarkable.45

Phoebe and Prisca (among many others) serve as evidence of Paul’s acceptance of women as equals alongside men and among his co-workers for spreading the faith and leading other Christians. But Paul’s egalitarian attitude does not end with women in religious offices. Indeed, many of the most appealing aspects of Paul’s Christianity to women lay in his desires and expectations for the daily lives of male and female followers alike. First, in the case of marriage, Paul was of the opinion that it was a good thing for a man and a woman to be married, but only on account of their inability to remain celibate, acknowledging that God did not grant all of his children the gift of self-restraint. Paul did believe, however, that a man or woman who had received such a gift would be far better off remaining chaste, and would thus have no need for a spouse to satisfy his or her desires.46 For a man and a woman who felt it necessary to marry, the partners would be obligated to pleasure each other, as this was the entire purpose of their contract. That is to say “neither has authority (*exousia*) over his or her own body, but the husband has authority over the wife’s body, while the wife has authority over the husband’s body.”47

Paul’s preference for celibacy over marriage was on account of its distraction from one’s learning and devotion to God, and for this reason, he not only wished for virgins to remain virgins, but also for widows to remain widows, and for already married couples to divorce if they were capable of being celibate
thereafter. It is noteworthy, however, that should a woman divorce her husband for the sake of her faith (which she was permitted and encouraged to do) she could not take up relations with another man, and if she found herself unable to keep her promise of abstinence, she should be remarried to her previous husband and not to any other. This same stance is taken with men who divorce their wives - an attitude far removed from that of the non-Christian men that have been examined to this point.

Women were undoubtedly attracted to Paul's encouragement to become educated and to remain autonomous through celibacy, however, their decisions to join him were just as likely influenced by the risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth, as well as the issues of infant mortality. Having the option to remain celibate and unmarried (and thus childless) allowed women to avoid a great deal of hardship. Where women did desire to become mothers, the Christian faith did not pardon a woman's abortion or the selective killing of her born infant as may have been ordered by her husband or father. Because abortion was accompanied by unbearable pain and often death, women were likely pleased to hear that they were in the right to refuse such a command. Presumably, refusing orders of infanticide post-birth were equally appealing. Overall, Paul's teachings sought to skew the privileges of both genders in women's favor, which is perhaps why pagan women appear to have converted to Christianity in greater numbers than pagan men.48 This egalitarianism is best summed up in Paul's most famous quote in a letter to the
Galatians - “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”49

Paul was indeed the Apostle of the Gentiles, spreading Christianity throughout the Roman empire like wild fire. Just as much, Paul was the apostle to women, attracting them through his allowance of their occupancy of the highest ranks alongside their fellow men, and also through his indirect advocacy for their equal treatment in the realm of marriage (where their prime duty as a non-Christian was to marry into subordination to her husband and bear children without choice). To conveniently ignore the opposing argument that Paul was not as feminist as many have come to believe, however, would not be conducive to research, and may even serve to invalidate the contrary argument. This argument against Paul’s advocation of women is most often supported with a quote from 1 Corinthians which discusses women refraining from speech in church:

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor 14:33b-35).50

That Paul was a personally conflicted man is made quite evident with this quote after all the evidence examined thus far, and scholars have debated ruthlessly over where Paul’s attitudes regarding women truly lie. Where he states in Galatians that there is “neither jew nor gentile, slave nor free, woman nor man,” implying a belief that everyone is equal, he then seems to suggest in Corinthians that he believes women are not equal to men, but are inferior and
should be subordinate. To this, some scholars have suggested that perhaps Paul's personal contention was on account of reluctance to turn the Christian movement into an outright social revolt against the long-held societal norms of his time and place. Perhaps, where Paul wished for the equal treatment of women, he found himself unable to actively work towards ensuring they received it so that he might continue to spread the faith successfully, and in some cases felt it was best to contradict himself in writing when he was confronted by a significant group of peoples who disliked his egalitarian stance. Nevertheless, regardless of what Paul may have written in his various statements on the proper roles of women, and regardless of his reasons for writing those statements, both his actions and his acknowledgements of the power and influence of women (evidenced by his remarks concerning to Phoebe, Prisca, and many others) should be considered very closely.

Prior to converting to Christianity, Jewish and gentile women alike were equally oppressed by the patriarchal attitudes of their time and place. A daughter was born to serve her father as a means of advancing the family through marriage, and a wife's responsibility was to bear children to inherit the family's property and wealth. That they remained modest, marriageable, and loyal was crucial to their ability to carry out their proper duties, and their lives were restricted in many ways to ensure they did not stray too far into the masculine realm. In addition to their responsibility to marry and have children, women were also expected to bend to their father's and husband's will, and abort or expose their babies if they were ordered to do so. Overall, women throughout the
Roman empire and Jewish Diaspora had very little scope, agency, or autonomy prior to joining Jesus and Paul in the Christian movement.

The egalitarianism of Jesus and Paul attracted women to the faith in hordes. Women were enthralled by their preachings which advocated for their equality alongside men, not just in regards to marriage and parenting, but also in regards to women holding a significant amount of power and influence as high ranking members of church leadership. The appeal of these positions is most evident when contrasted with the repressive environment within which women lived in pagan Roman or Jewish society. It was this combination of Jesus' and Paul's acceptance of women and women's great attraction to them that lead to their mass conversions, and this is partly why women were able to exercise such a great deal of power and influence in early Christianity.

Chapter 2  
Pagan Priesthoods – Establishing the precedent

Chapter 1 has established that women were able to play a sizable role in and hold a great deal of influence over early Christianity because of the egalitarian attitudes of Jesus and Paul, which offered them a tremendous amount of scope, agency, and independence, and which attracted them to the faith in substantial numbers hard to neglect. Remembering man's equality in the eyes of the Lord as a fundamental teaching of Christ helps to explain women's welcome and prominence in the early stages of the cult following, but unfortunately, it is not sufficient to answer our question on its own. Apart from their vast numbers,
why were women able to exercise such power and influence in early Christianity? An examination of women’s religious lives prior to the domination of Christianity will demonstrate that their participation and achievable status in the early church was not without precedent. When Paul introduced his religion to the Gentiles of the Greco-Roman world, the newly Christianized communities accepted women into high profile positions because they had occupied similar positions in pagan religions since long before the coming of Christ. This precedent and the ease with which it allowed women to take up analogous posts contributed greatly to their ability to exercise power and influence over the early church.

Many aspects of Christianity overlapped with those of preceding and contemporary cults and priesthoods that allowed women to share in their worship at various levels, regardless of the importance or esteem associated with them. The Pythia at Delphi, the Vestal Virgins of Rome, and the Priestess of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis were three widely differing pagan priesthoods which exemplified both women holding priesthoods of tremendous clout and the overlap in functions and duties between Christian and pagan offices. This chapter will outline these three priesthoods and compare them to Christianity, thus illustrating the conventionality of women holding religious power prior to Christ and showing evidence of the precedent that allowed women to do so in the early church. Before such an outline can be made, however, a note on pagan priesthoods is in order.
To speak generally of pagan priesthoods in the Greco-Roman world from the time of Greek domination through that of the Romans is exceptionally difficult, if not impossible. Cross-cultural analyses have often failed to address the diversity of religious offices and their functions, and have instead chosen to refer to all office holders as ‘priests’ with little to no distinction.\(^{51}\) This wrongly implies, of course, that to be a priest of a god or goddess in a certain time and location was the same as being a priest for a different god or goddess in a different time and location. More problematic still, the broad and generalized use of the term ‘priest’ to refer to anyone tasked with a specific role in worship has an equalizing effect on the status of various religious offices which were, in actuality, dramatically diverse in their ranking.\(^{52}\) We know that there was a substantial difference in power and influence between religious officials chosen by lot, those who were elected by popular vote, and those who inherited their position through birth. We know that religious offices closed to plebeians were more esteemed than those which were not, but offices closed only to the lower-classes afforded plebeians the opportunity to greatly distinguish themselves from the people further down the social order. Also noteworthy are the differences between state priesthoods, and priesthoods in cult religions. Regarding the state, religious and political offices went hand in hand, and were both sought after to gain clout and recognition to advance in the other. Take, for instance, Julius Caesar, who was elected as pontifex maximus (chief priest) in the year 63 BC, and subsequently created and adopted the new office of dictator (avoiding the taboo associated with the title of ‘king’ or Rex) in the year 49 BC.\(^{53}\) As pointed out by Mary Beard:
“it is hard to be sure what is cause and what effect: his political career was aided by his attainment of major religious office; but then, conversely, his attainment of the office of pontifex maximus was itself aided by his political prominence.”54 Unlike the state religious offices, priesthoods in the cult religions were commonly occupied by individuals who felt they had a ‘priestly calling’, and such individuals may have had to wait until they received the deity’s blessing before they could move up in rank.55 Beard exemplifies this mode of priestly initiation by quoting a work from 160 AD titled The Golden Ass:

I frequently spoke of (becoming a priest) to the High Priest, begging him to initiate me into the mysteries of the holy night… He explained that the day on which a postulant might be initiated was always indicated by signs from the Goddess herself, and that it was she who chose the officiating priest and announced how the incidental expenses of the ceremony were to be paid. In his view I ought to wait with attentive patience and avoid the extremes of overeagerness and obstinacy; being neither unresponsive when called nor importunate while awaiting my call. (Golden Ass 11,21)56

Material wealth and social status aside, having a deity’s personal blessing to act as a leader in their cult would have afforded someone a decent amount of influence and respect from their peers, although it was of a different kind than was afforded to the state religious officials.

It is necessary, at this point, to reiterate the many issues with the title ‘priest’. In just two examples, we see the title of chief priest, and we see a man begging the high priest to make him a priest himself. Without knowing the details of each of these offices, or the details of individual priests as they are referenced in the extant sources, it is impossible to differentiate between their levels of importance, or to say for certain what responsibilities they had. For these reasons, this chapter only uses examples on which much can be said regarding
the characteristics of the religious post, or those which have been referred to by a title much more specific than 'priest'. This will be beneficial when it is time to compare these pagan offices with the well labeled and defined offices of Christianity. Having noted the criteria for selection, we can now move through our examples chronologically to confirm the long-held tradition of respectable women's priesthoods that withstood the test of time from the rise of the Greek world and through the age of the Roman Empire.

The earliest prominent religious position held by a woman that can be examined in great detail is that of the Pythia (oracle) at the temple of Apollo at Delphi. According to tradition, the Pythia was established between the 8th and 7th centuries BC by Phemone, the daughter of Apollo, and the post remained active until the 4th century AD when it was closed by Emperor Theodosius I of Rome. As the daughter of Apollo and her successors, the Pythia was seen as a holy woman and was renowned for her ability to mediate between the gods and men. Her services were sought by people from all over the ancient world, including those with substantial wealth and authority, speaking to the respect for her power. The position of the Pythia was held by one woman for life, although three of them were required to share the duties at the height of their demand. It is not certain how a woman was selected for the position - if she was chosen from a prominent family or from the priestesses already present at the temple - but it is known the woman had to be Delphinian, and had to be of sound character. To be a young virgin was also among the original requirements for selection, but an incident in which an oracle was kidnapped and raped changed
the ruling in favor of women over age 50 who were expected to remain chaste thereafter. Once a woman became the Pythia, she was relieved of all familial responsibilities (if she had been married), she was awarded a salary with tax exemptions, the right to own property, and was housed at the state’s expense. Priests and priestesses at the temple who directly shared in the Pythia’s responsibilities were awarded similarly.

On the seventh day of each month from spring until winter, the Pythia would answer questions and give prophecies to those who came to see her. She was off duty at all other times. On a day of prophesying, she would wash in the Castalian spring to become ritually pure before entering the temple whereupon she would carry out her next order of business, burning a mixture of barley and laurel leaves as an offering, and then pouring cold water onto a goat to see if it would shiver. If it shivered, then Apollo was willing to communicate through her, but if it did not, the temple would remain closed. Those who wished to see the oracle on a functioning day would lineup in order of their rank. Delphinians always went first, and then Greek peoples governed by Delphi, other Greeks, and then all non-Greeks. The price that each man would pay to enter the temple varied based upon whether or not he had a personal question, or if he had been sent on behalf of his city, but the cost was no doubt substantial for everyone when added to that of their travel expenses and their time spent away from their duties at home. Costly as the visit may have been, it did ensure the questions presented to the oracle were worthwhile. Individual inquiries varied greatly, but documented exchanges are demonstrative of how credible the oracle
was believed to be, the circumstances under which her consultation was deemed necessary, and how seriously her answers were taken. According to Herodotus, around the year 480 BC, the Athenians sent two delegates to speak with the Pythia, Aristonike, regarding the impending battles with the Persians. Her prophecy warned of their doom if they did not evacuate the city immediately, and the two men were horribly dismayed. Not wishing to return home with such frightening news, they went back to Aristonike and pleaded that she show them the way to a brighter future. The Pythia responded:

Unable is Pallas to appease Zeus Olympian
With copious prayers, with counsel quite cunning.
Now to you once again my word I shall speak, making it adamantine:
The rest will be taken, all lying within the boundary of Kekrops
And that of the hollow of sacred Cithaeron.
But a wall made of wood does farsighted Zeus to Tritogenes grant
Alone and unravaged, to help you and your children.
Do not await peacefully the horse and the foot,
The army gigantic that comes from the mainland;
Withdraw, turn your backs, though someday you still will meet face to face
O Salamis Divine, the children of women you will yet destroy
While Demeter is scattered or while she is gathered.91

The delegates returned to Athens with the oracle's message, and an argument ensued between the city's politicians over its meaning. Some took “wooden walls” to mean they should build a wall around Athens to keep the Persians out of the city, but others believed that the wooden walls were referring to their triremes, and that they should defend against the Persians in a naval battle. Themistocles, a respected general and politician who had strongly advocated for strengthening the Athenian navy in recent years prior, came out in favor of the trireme interpretation, and the majority of Athenians chose to follow his lead. Those who stayed behind and attempted to barricade themselves in the
city were destroyed by the Persians, but Themistocles lead his followers to a
major victory at the battle of Salamis. In yet another example of the grave
situations the Pythia was thought fit to handle, the people of Thera, overcome by
a seven year drought, were advised to establish themselves in Libya where they
would henceforth prosper. The Theraians did not know where Libya was, nor
had they ever heard of such a place, but trusting in the oracle, they sent to the
Cretens and asked if any man knew of such a place. It was there that they met a
fisherman who offered to show them the way, and a group of Theraians were
able to found a colony whereupon the rest of their peoples came to settle c. 630
BC. Finally, moving to a much more simple inquiry, and one much closer to the
time of Christ, Cicero, an esteemed politician, rhetorician, and writer, asked the
Pythia at Delphi in 67 BC how he should go about acquiring fame. The oracle
instructed him to “make his own character his guide in life.”

Mediating between men and deities was a common practice throughout
the ancient world. In a prophetic sense, the Pythia and her peers were not so
different from prophets in the Old and New Testament - the significance of whom
were established in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: “And God has appointed
in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, and then workers of
miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in Various kinds of
tongues.” The most notable example of a woman prophet recognized in
Christianity is that of Miriam, the older sister of Aaron and Moses in the Old
Testament. As a child, Miriam was markedly wise beyond her years, and was
said to be so pure that she was free from Eve's sin. Guided by God at the age of
five, she is said to have stood in opposition to the Pharaoh's decree that all male children be put to death, and also in opposition to her father's decision to end Jewish marriages in order to spare the unborn children. After convincing her father to remarry her mother, she prophesied her mother would give birth to the boy that would save the Hebrews. When Moses was born, Miriam, who was by then six-years-of-age, used her cunning to ensure he was not killed by the Egyptians, and he was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. After acting as God's prophet and single-handedly paving the way for the birth and survival of Moses, Miriam continued to communicate face to face with God along side her two brothers as the three of them lead the Hebrews to salvation. That Miriam's status was subordinate to Moses', equal to Aaron's, and above all others is exemplified when God speaks in Micah 6:4 - "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam." Christianity's acceptance of the Old Testament as holy scripture allows Miriam and her female peers to serve as evidence that women were allowed to be recognized as prophets - a tradition that Christians had to accept. It is worth noting, however, being that prophets are listed as second only to apostles, this acceptance was often done through clenched teeth. Kraemer observes:

At the very least, women prophets... troubled Paul because they derived from their ecstatic, prophetic experiences status, authority, and prestige that threatened his own. Paul must have found himself in an extraordinary bind, for his own claims to leadership and authority were located not in the traditional apostolic claims to knowledge of the earthly Jesus, but in a revelation from the risen Jesus and in the continuing experience of precisely such prophetic ecstasy.
The Pythia at Delphi and the women prophets in the Old and New Testament were women recognized, respected, and honored for their abilities to communicate directly with the gods on the behalf of others. They were not disregarded as being frenzied or frivolous by virtue of being women, nor were they barred from prophesying on behalf of male deities.

A second pagan priesthood that was undoubtedly as well known to the ancients as the Pythia, was that of the Vestal Virgins. The Vestal Virgins were priestesses to the goddess Vesta, a deity of Etruscan origin that was introduced to Rome in a blending of the cultures under the second Etruscan king, Numa Pompilius. According to legend, King Numitor of Alba Longa had one son and daughter. Upon the king's death, his brother, Amulius, killed his son and forced his daughter, Rhea Silvia, to become a Vestal Virgin so that she would never bear children to challenge him. Rhea then, without compromising her virginity, became pregnant with the twin sons of Mars. She named the boys Romulus and Remus, and they became the founders of Rome. When Numa succeeded Romulus on the throne c. 753 BC, he established the cult of Vesta as an official cult of Rome, and he appointed two Vestals to the office. The number was later increased to four under the reign of Augustus, and then to six at a later date. Selection of the Vestal Virgins was the duty of the pontifex maximus, who chose among aristocratic girls between the ages of six and ten whose chastity was unlikely to have been compromised. Both parents had to be alive and of a respectable status, and the young girl had to be unburdened by physical imperfections and impaired senses. Once consecrated, she was expected to
remain in servitude to the goddess for a term of thirty years. Being that the office of the Vestal Virgins was a full-time priesthood, they were expected to carry out numerous tasks in addition to guarding the hearth. They were charged with offering bloodless sacrifices using salt wafers made from a substance called Mola Salsa, which was a baked mixture of ground salt and sacred water that they prepared themselves.\(^{71}\) They were also expected to fetch their own water from the holy spring, as the city’s supply was considered to be impure and unsuitable for any religious purposes, including the daily blessing of the temple. The Vestals’ relationship to the state also obliged them to participate in various festivals and rituals throughout the year. They were the hostesses of the Vestalia, a festival dedicated to Vesta and reserved for women alone; they rekindled the hearth for the New Year’s celebration in March, and also partook in the festival of the Bona Dea in December.\(^{72}\) Once a Vestal’s 30-year term had expired, she was freed from her duties and was not required to enter under anyone’s guardianship, although she could marry if she chose. However, if a Vestal were to break her vow of chastity before her term ended, she would be put to death either by being buried alive or locked away to starve. That the Virgins remained pure and satisfied their goddess was of the utmost importance to the city of Rome and its citizens, who believed any failure on their part risked bringing Vesta’s wrath upon the people. If the Romans were to suffer a military defeat for example, the Vestals might be blamed and accused of having either broken their vow or neglected their duties, and several of them could be put to death at one time.\(^{73}\) While Vestal Virgins were expected to endure a profound
weight, the stress of the title was balanced with immense prestige and its associated trappings. The benefits of the position included full independence from a man’s tutelage, which gave Vestals the right to hand down property as their own, along with the right to produce their own legal wills, regardless of whether or not their father was alive. To further exemplify their sacred status, senators were expected to bow their faces in the presence of a Vestal Virgin, and “a criminal who accidentally met a Vestal on the way to execution was spared... and anyone who passed under the litter on which a Vestal was carried was put to death.”

Among the many parallels which can be drawn between the cult of Vesta and that of Christ, some are strikingly obvious - the story of the virginal mother, the offering of wafers as a bloodless sacrifice, and a Vestal’s power to forgive someone who meets her on the verge of their death. Societal attitudes towards women’s virginity were discussed at length in chapter one, and the significance of the virgin birth hardly calls for explanation. What is more intriguing is the Vestals’ bloodless sacrifice with wafers and their power of forgiveness in relation to the Christian Eucharist and the Power of the Keys. Kramer tells us: “There is considerable evidence that in the early Christian centuries, priestly functions (especially blessing the Eucharist) were performed by persons with the title presbyter, or elder.” She goes on to note: “The formal establishment of a Christian priesthood is exceedingly late,” and “all evidence for Christian women with the title presbyter (elder) is therefore potentially testimony to women performing priestly functions.” Primary evidence of women holding these titles
comes in the form of contemporary inscriptions. One such inscription, from third century AD Asia Minor, reads "Diogas the bishop to Ammion (fem.) the elder, in memory."\textsuperscript{77} Another inscription reads: "Here lies Kale, the elder. She lived 50 years blamelessly. Her life ended September 14th."\textsuperscript{78} It is interesting, and worth noting here, that aside from inscriptions such as these, a great deal of our supporting evidence for women performing priestly functions comes from those who are hard against it. This is made expressly clear in Giorgio Otranto's examination of the epistle of Pope Gelasius I.\textsuperscript{79}

The last pagan priesthood to be discussed is that of the priestess of Demeter at Eleusis. Demeter is known to have had five officials under her charge in the Eleusinian Mysteries, including her priestess. Only scant information has survived regarding the duties of her post, but it is known that she was always recognized as "the priestess," to distinguish herself from female initiates below her. She was elected from a prestigious family, although it did not have to be from the Eumolpidae or the Kerykes as the other office holders, and her office was held for life.\textsuperscript{80} The priestess, along with the hierophant, were the highest ranking religious officials in the Eleusinian Mysteries, which is not only made apparent by their consistent co-participation where other officials are excluded, but also in their numerous documented quarrels in which one or the other was accused of encroaching on the other's duties.\textsuperscript{81} Among the known responsibilities of the priestess was her participation in the rites of initiation, particularly during the tele, the rites of which are best explained proceeding Demeter's myth.
The story of how Demeter's mysteries found themselves at Eleusis is well known. When Demeter discovered her daughter, Kore, had been taken by Hades and that Zeus had allowed it to occur, she left the house of the gods and sought sanctuary in the city of Eleusis. She disguised herself among the women there and nursed an infant placed in her care, but ultimately revealed her true self and demanded the people of the city build and dedicate a temple in her honor. Once her temple was built, however, she remained in a terrible depression, and mankind was driven near to extinction due to her desolating of the land. Zeus offered many gifts and honors to appease her, but Demeter insisted only her daughter's face would save the people. Zeus was left with no choice and called on Hades to return Kore to her mother. Hades complied, but not before feeding Kore a pomegranate seed to ensure her return to him. Upon being reunited with her daughter, Demeter allowed the crops to grow once more and mankind was saved, although the lands returned to their bare state for one-third of the year when Kore was brought back to the underworld. The Mysteries of Demeter and their association with the death and resurrection of the earth are not unlike the other Mystery religions, including Christianity, which all promise some form of eternal life. More noteworthy for our purposes, however, is the similarity between the initiations into the Eleusinian Mysteries and Christianity. The Eleusinian Mysteries were divided into greater and lesser categories, and initiation, which I have stated was done by the priestess, took place during the former. All initiates were sworn to secrecy, so the extant sources contain only a few accounts of what took place, but the accounts that
have been written show a considerable likeness in events when compared to the
Christian baptism and communion. The greater mysteries began with the tele,
which was closed to anyone not being initiated. Harold Willoughby draws on the
experiences of Euipides and Turtullian to describe the process as such:

On the day following the assembly came the cry, "To the sea, O Mystae!" and the
candidates for initiation ran down to the sea, there to purify themselves in its salt
waves—a lustration believed to be of greater virtue than that of fresh water. "Sea
waves wash away ill sin," said Euripides... Tertullian, in speaking of this rite,
declared, "At the Eleusinian mysteries men are baptized and they assume that
the effect of this is their regeneration and the remission of the penalties due to
their perjuries."83

Willoughby goes on to observe: "This striking affirmation by a Christian
writer shows that the initiates themselves applied the new birth comparison to
their own experiences in Eleusinian baptism." The confirmation stage of initiation
appears to have taken place near the end of the festival, and Willoughby explains
the process based upon the report by Clement of Alexandria:

His statement is, "The password of the Eleusinian Mysteries is as follows: 'I have
fasted, I have drunk the barley drink, I have taken things from the sacred chest,
having tasted thereof I have placed them into the basket and again from the
basket into the chest.'"... The meaning of the first two elements in the process is
fairly clear. The fasting of the mystae corresponded to that of the sorrowing
goddess Demeter who "sat smileless, nor tasted meat nor drink, wasting with
long desire for her deep-bosomed daughter." Likewise the drinking of the barley
drink corresponded to the breaking of her fast; for the goddess had refused a cup
of sweet wine, "but she had them mix meal and water with the tender herb of
mint, and give it to her to drink." This mixed potion the goddess accepted.
Accordingly, in drinking a similar potation the mystae shared the cup from which
the great goddess drank in her sorrow. It was a direct and sympathetic
participation in the experiences of the goddess, an action expressive of attained
fellowship with the deity. Just what the eating of food from the chest meant to
the participant is less obvious. Like the drinking of the barley drink, it was
probably a sacrament of communion, and it may have implied an even more
realistic communion than was involved in the act of drinking. If, as is most likely,
the sacred food consisted of cereals, then the assimilation of this food meant a
direct and realistic union with Demeter, the goddess of grain. It meant an
incorporation of divine substance into the human body.84
That women in pagan priesthoods were allowed or expected to carry out initiation rites, particularly initiation rites so strikingly similar to those of Christianity, further explains why they continued to do so after their conversion. The normalcy associated with women and initiation is made even more evident when considering the lack of objection from the communities in which they worked. One such Christian woman who carried out baptisms on the behalf of her community was Thecla, who met substantial opposition from Tertullian, who helped explain the Eleusinian initiation above. The Acts of Thecla describe her as a teacher and as having performed her own baptism, and also credit her with having “enlightened many,” inferring her baptism of the community.\(^{85}\)

The Pythia at Delphi, the Vestal Virgins at Rome, and the priestess of Demeter at Eleusis all exemplify women playing high profile roles in the pagan religions that pre-dated Christianity, and thus established the precedent that allowed for women to continue doing so when Paul set about converting the empire. That pagan women were accepted as prophets, that they were expected to bless and offer bloodless sacrifices, that their holiness granted them the power to forgive transgressions, and that they were able to participate in cult initiations similar to baptism and confirmation help to explain why women’s power and influence in the early church was accepted as conventional, and why women were able to continue holding such power and influence in Christianity for many years to come.
Chapter 3
Persecution and Martyrdom – A Source of Light in Trying Times

To this point, women's power and influence in early Christianity has been discussed within the context of their titles and duties, which were shown to have been the same titles and duties used by men to exercise equal power and influence over their communities. Works by scholars like Giorgio Otranto, Ross Kraemer, and many others have provided convincing evidence in support of women continuing to carry out priestly functions well into the middle ages, however, their sources are almost exclusively written by Church officials denigrating the act, and thus simultaneously demonstrating the extent to which women became marginalized over time. Nevertheless, this growing exclusion from the priesthood did not translate into women losing their abilities to exercise power and influence over and in their communities, and great honors continued to be bestowed upon them through the ages. This chapter draws upon the lives of exemplary women to show they did not need the esteem or official authority of the Christian priesthood to stand out above the rest, and in fact were able to assume tremendous respect by acting as martyrs at times of persecution, and by leading commendable and inspirational lives at times of peace.

When Christianity began to spread throughout the Roman Empire, eventually making its way to the city of Rome, it was tolerated by both the people and politicians as merely another mystery cult, not unlike that of Isis, Mithras, or Demeter, who had all firmly established their niche in the city by that time. By the year 64 AD, however, the title of “Christian” had developed an unpleasant air
among the pagans, making them the ideal scapegoat for Nero to place the blame for the Great Fire in the city. Tacitus writes in his *Annals*: “To dispel the gossip Nero therefore found culprits on whom he inflicted the most exotic punishments. These were people hated for their shameful offences whom the common people called Christians.”87 After a period of toleration, persecution of Christians was resumed under Emperor Domitian in the year 89 AD, and continued through the reign of Trajan. Trajan's correspondence with Pliny the Younger regarding how Christians were to be punished and for what reasons provides the most reliable illustration of pagan attitudes towards Christians at that time.88 In his letters, Pliny stated that names of Christians had been submitted to him anonymously, and that he executed all of them while sparing the one man who proved himself to be a Christian no longer. This man informed Pliny that Christians were not guilty of the various crimes attributed to them, and his statement was verified when Pliny tortured two slave girls who called themselves deaconesses. Pliny asked Trajan if he responded appropriately, and to establish how the situation should be handled in the future. Should children be spared? Should those who denounce their faith and swear loyalty to the emperor and the gods be forgiven? If they are to be forgiven, should they be set free, or remain in custody? Trajan's response was brief, simply stating that every case was to be handled individually, and that Pliny was not to seek them out, nor accept anonymous submissions, and he was only to punish those who did not denounce their god.89
Pliny's questions to Trajan show that while the Christians had become considerably disliked by this point, no rules or guidelines had been officially laid against them. Hadrian's response to the Christian dilemma was more tolerant than his predecessors, stating that a Christian's faith alone was not sufficient grounds for punishment, and even went so far as to order any person falsely accusing a Christian of a crime to be punished themselves. Hadrian's successors, however, adopted the stances of those before him, and Christians were forced to perform sacrifices to the state gods and renounce Christ, else they would be imprisoned. Failure to comply also subjected Christians to execution, either by beheading if they were Roman citizens, or by being torn apart by animals in a bloody spectacle. The Great Persecution under Diocletian and Galerius was among the last struggles the Christians had to endure against the Roman pagans.

The Great Persecution began in 303 AD with Diocletian's first edict in which he demanded that Christians' property be seized, their assemblages ceased, and their scriptures and churches destroyed. High ranking citizens who practiced Christianity were stripped of their titles, and Christian members of the imperial family were thrown into slavery. Diocletian's second and third edicts ordered all priests and bishops be imprisoned, and offered their freedom if they performed a sacrifice. The emperor was certain that many would come forward, thereby fracturing the Christian resolve and community, and some did, however many of those Christians who performed sacrifices did so under force or torture, and the emperor freed many more from the prisons claiming himself that these
men and women had sacrificed when indeed they had not. Diocletian's fourth and final edict, similar to his second, ordered all Christians to sacrifice at a public gathering else they be executed. This edict was carried out in some areas of the empire, but notably, the territories of Constantius and Maximian ignored it completely.\textsuperscript{92}

Several reasons have been given to explain the utter contempt pagans felt towards Christians, but most ironically, the sources seem to suggest much of it was in response to the intolerant attitudes of Christians themselves. Edward Gibbon interprets the reason for the persecutions as two-fold. Firstly, the extreme secretiveness that shrouded the initiations, rites, and meetings caused non-Christians to guess at what they entailed. Incomplete and uncorrected accounts of the Eucharist circulated among the populace and ultimately transformed into a wide belief that Christians were practitioners of cannibalism, and they were also believed to enter into incestuous relationships with one another due to their calling fellow Christians brothers and sisters.\textsuperscript{93} The second and much more serious reason for disliking Christians was their animosity towards their pagan family, ancestors, and neighbors. Gibbon states that while the Jews held an equal disposition towards the world around them, they were a country - a large, unified body of people with a deep history and shared ancestry that gave them the right to unify themselves against outside peoples as they saw fit. The Christians, by contrast, were but a 'sect' within the greater pagan society of Rome, and thus the disdain with which they viewed the Roman people was considered to be a great disrespect.\textsuperscript{94} At this point, it is crucial to clarify that
these were the attitudes of the Roman people. Politicians at various levels undoubtedly shared in these opinions, however, it is evident that the cause for persecution by Roman officials was the result of a great push from below. Several emperors displayed a lack of enthusiasm in regard to pursuing and punishing Christians, which was visible in the persecutions under Domitian and Trajan, and the significant lack thereof under Hadrian. Also noteworthy is the observation that any attempts by the government at persecuting the Christians in such a manner as was done would not have been successful without the support of the populace. Overall, the Christians found themselves in a struggle against the common people who surrounded them and who were much harder to hide from than the officials of the Empire. It is partly due to this bleak situation, however, that many Christians were able to stand above the rest as champions of the faith, acting as confessors and martyrs. This led to their ascension as inspirational and respected leaders where they may not have been before, and ultimately led to their sanctification upon death.

In 177 AD, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the Christians in the Gallic city of Lyons were hunted down in what W. H. C. Frend labels "one of the most terrible dramas in the history of the early Church." According to Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, a woman named Blandina was among the first to be martyred in this conflict that killed nearly 50 people. The majority of the Christian community at Lyons were immigrants of Asiatic origin, although Blandina herself is thought to have been native to Gaul. She was a slave who had been converted to Christianity by her mistress, and was not thought to have been a
woman of any great significance prior to her triumphal stand against the pagans. When the persecution began, Blandina was arrested along with the other members of her church. Many of the slaves testified against their masters under the threat of torture, and they were released upon doing so. Unfortunately for those who remained, the slaves' testimonies perpetuated the belief that the Christians were all monstrous cannibals, and any amount of mercy from their torturers was replaced with a tremendous desire to make them suffer. Frend observes that even their more moderate acquaintances in the town began to look at them with disgust. When it was Blandina's turn to be tortured, the prisoners were terribly dismayed, believing that she, as both a frail woman and a slave, would testify against her masters and subject them to even greater misery for the sake of her own freedom, however, Blandina held true to her faith. Eusebius recalled that Blandina was subjected to the worst tortures, but would not break. Each night, after the tortures had grown exhausted with their work, Blandina was returned to her cell where she encouraged the other Christians to follow her example and remain true. This went on for several days until she, along with the Christians Sanctus, Maturus, and Attalus were taken to the amphitheatre to be torn apart by beasts. Maturus and Sanctus were killed quickly, but the lions would not harm Blandina. Surviving the lions subjected her to further torture, but the result remained the same. When the fifteen-year-old boy named Ponticus was brought into the arena to share in her fate, she again spoke of her savior Jesus Christ and convinced the boy to endure. Blandina watched the boy's death, and then she herself was finally killed
after being tied to a steak and mauled by bulls. Frend’s closing comments on Blandina’s death speak to the tremendous influence she had over the people around her, Christian and otherwise:

Popular hatred was tempered by a few flashes of human sympathy for the victims. Of Blandina, for instance, those who watched her first tortures in the amphitheatre are reported to have said ‘that never among them had a woman suffered so much for so long’. When it was all over, others could ask, half in pity, ‘Where is their god, and what good to them was their worship which they preferred beyond their lives?’ Sometimes such thoughts proved to be the first stirrings towards acceptance of the Christian faith. But in Gaul it was to be a long time before this happened.98

The death of Perpetua provides yet another example of women having been able to exercise exceptional influence and power over the people around them on account of their martyrdom. Nearly 30 years after the persecution at Lyons, Perpetua and the Christians from their community were arrested for disobeying the emperor’s order to offer a sacrifice to the gods. Perpetua was prodded by her father to renounce her faith so that she may save herself and raise her infant, but she refused, and continued to nurse her child in her cell among the prisoners.99 Her strength earned her a respectable reputation, and she quickly took on a leadership role within the prison. Kraemer notes that Perpetua single handedly spoke on behalf of the group on two occasions, convincing them to improve their conditions and treat them with respect. On the first occasion, while awaiting execution, she tells the guards that the prisoners ought to be allowed to dine among them, arguing that their display in the arena would provide much more entertainment if they were strong and healthy rather than weak and meager. On the second occasion, she convinces the guards to
not force the Christians into pagan clothing before entering the theatre, thus preserving their honor.\textsuperscript{100} It is clear that Perpetua was able to become as power and influential as Blandina without having to endure such extreme tortures and conditions, however, what sets their martyrdoms apart is Perpetua's exercising the power of the keys - "the power to forgive the sins of those who had denied the faith and were therefore thought to have lost salvation."\textsuperscript{101} While she was in prison, Perpetua dreamed of her younger brother whom had died of cancer at the age of seven before his baptism. He was suffering immensely, and perpetua prayed that he be saved. The following night, Perpetua received yet another dream of her brother, although this time was seen to be happy and healthy and free from his wounds.

Frederick Klawiter uses Perpetua's story to exemplify the extraordinary powers thought to have been bestowed upon martyrs in the early Church, and likens them to those held by ministers. In fact, it was not at all uncommon for a Christian who had risen to a ministerial rank through confessing to keep their rank and powers if they were to have been released from prison. Unfortunately, as contention grew over the proper roles of women in the Church, Christian officials began to draw a distinction between confessors who were released from prison and those who went through to their deaths as martyrs. The former would hold their powers as long as they were imprisoned, but they would be lost if they were freed before their death.\textsuperscript{102}

Regardless of the status and respect women held prior to their confessions as Christians, and regardless of the official titles they were or were
not able to hold upon their release from prison, it is clear that they were able to find their niche among the true leaders of the early Christians. Their indomitable spirit in the face of torture and death and their commanding and comforting qualities as women caused their fellow Christians to look to them for hope and reassurance when the temptation to surrender was strongest. To die as a martyr was among the greatest honors a Christian could achieve, and in doing so women like Blandina and Perpetua managed to solidify themselves into history as saints, although they were not the first, and most certainly were not the last.

Behind their action lies the whole theology of martyrdom in the early Church. They were seeking by their death to attain to the closest possible imitation of Christ’s Passion and death. This was the heart of their attitude. Christ himself suffered in the martyr. Love of Christ and hope of salvation through Christ alone was their inspiration and the essence of their faith. The martyr was ‘a true disciple of Christ’... one who ‘follows the Lamb wheresoever he goes’, namely to death... Even the stake to which Blandina was tied in the amphitheatre was likened in their eyes to a Cross. The confessors ‘saw with their outward eyes in the form of their sister Him who was crucified for them’.103

**Conclusion**

The evidence examined in chapter 1 established the patriarchal nature of the Greco-Roman and Jewish world in which Christianity developed, and demonstrated that the teachings of Christ and the ministry of Paul appealed to women because they offered them scope, agency, power, and authority they did not have in pagan and Jewish society. This scope and agency in daily life was coupled with an acceptance of women in high profile ministerial positions that afforded women a great deal of power and influence in their communities.
Chapter 2 identified various prestigious pagan priesthoods and women's participation in them to exhibit the conventionality of women sharing in the power of Christian offices as leaders, and chapter 3 provided compelling examples of women as sources of hope and inspiration in the trying times of the Christian persecutions. The extraordinary roles women played in the early development of the Christian church are uncontestable, and the evidence is clear to anyone who looks beyond the surface. Research of this sort has been used, and continues to be part of the conversation in more recent times by those who believe women should be ordained in the modern Catholic church. Unfortunately, it is difficult to say when this research will come to fruition as many continue to consider only pieces of this same information, such as Paul's statements regarding women keeping silent in church, separate from other evidence and only at face value. Nevertheless, continued research of women in the early church is necessary for the re-write of women's history, and ought to persist regardless of the current stance of the church.

3 Ibid, 18.
6 Ibid, 20
7 Ibid, 29.
8 Ibid, 30-32.
9 Ibid, 32.
10 Ibid, 33.
11 Ibid, 15-17
12 Ibid, 35-38.
15 Caldwell, Roman Girlhood, 116.
16 Eve D’Ambra, Roman Women (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 84.
17 Ibid, 82-85.
18 Hilarion, private letter, 1BC, in Lefkowitz and Fant, trans. Women’s Life, 236.
20 Ibid, 129.
23 Caldwell, Roman Girlhood, 28.
26 Ibid, 54-55.
27 Ibid, 55.
28 Ibid, 57.
29 Ibid, 58.
30 Ibid, 64.
32 Ibid, 36.
33 Ibid, 40.
34 Ibid, 43.
37 Ibid, 106-117.
38 Ibid, 115.
39 Ibid, 111.
40 Ibid, 112.
41 Ibid, 110.
42 Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Paul on Women and Gender” in Women and Christian Origins, eds. Kraemer and D’Angelo, 224.
43 Ibid, 224.
44 Ibid, 224.
46 Ibid, 227.
47 Ibid, 227
48 Ibid, 221-236.
49 Ibid, 230.
50 Ibid, 232.
52 Ibid, 3.
53 Ibid, 7.
54 Ibid, 7.
59 Ibid, 32.
60 Scott, Delphi, 15-16.
63 Ibid, 4.149-159, 341-347.
64 Scott, Delphi, 200.
65 Kraemer, Her Share of the Blessings, 175.
66 Exod. 1:1-Num. 20:1, RSV
67 Mic. 6:4, RSV.
68 Kraemer, Her Share of the Blessings, 175.
75 Kraemer, Her Share of the Blessings, 183.
76 Ibid, 183.
78 “Epitaph of a Christian Woman Elder” (93) in Kraemer, ed. Maenads, Martyrs, 211.


Ibid, 76.


Ibid, 60.


Eusebius, "Historia Ecclesiastica" 8.2, 8.6 and Eusebius, "De Martyribus Palestinae" ch. 3-4, 9, *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook* https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/persec1.asp


Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 279.


Ibid, 8.

Ibid, 10.


Frederick C. Klawiter, "The Role of Martyrdom and Persecution in Developing the Priestly Authority of Women in Early Christianity: A Case Study of Montanism" *Church History* 49, no. 3 (1980): 254.

Klawiter, "The Role of Martyrdom and Persecution," 254-255.


