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Women's Status in Antiquity

Abstract

My paper focuses on the roots of the European equality thinking in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome and Israel. These five cultures produced the individual basis from which early Christianity arose.

Mesopotamian women were not equal to men in general. The basis of the Mesopotamian society was the household in which tha paterfamilia had the authority. On the other hand, this authority was mirrored by strict responsibility to 'feed and clothe' members of this household. However, paterfamilia's authority was not unrestricted but the law protected the besic rights of both the women and other dependent members. Women's position was much due to economic role of the household. Investment to girls was waste because it was another family which would benefit it.

In Egypt, women were equal to men in front of law. In marriage, man and women were equal partners and love between couple was highly valuated.

Israel was a mixture of Babylon and Egypt. In principle, also a woman was an image of God but it was through her that the sin came to world and, thus, she was doomed to be under a man.

Both in Greece and Rome, men, as paterfamilias, had total power over their household, including right to punish anyone by death penalty.

In early Christianity, women were equal to men. It is significant that in the most important stories of Jesus (birth, crusifixion, resurrection) the major roles were reserved to women. However, along with diffusion to highly patriarchal societies of Greece and Rome, also Chriatianity started to emphasise man's superiority over woman.