The Priestess in the Greco-Roman World

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THE word *sacerdos* in Latin is epicene, whereas the Greek ἱερευς is capable of a feminine form, ἱερεια. In either language the Greco-Roman world was acquainted with female as well as male sacred personages, though these would not in every case be priests in the sense of offerers of sacrifices. The most conspicuous were the Vestal Virgins at Rome, who as guardians of the sacred fire probably represented the king's daughters who had tended the hearth in the days when the king of Rome was the chief of a primitive clan by the Tiber. Selected between the age of six and ten for thirty years service, after which they could leave and marry (but often did not), they lived in dignity in the Atrium Vestae of which the remains may still be seen in the Forum. The fire in Vesta's shrine was annually rekindled by a priest on the first of March, the old Roman New Year's Day; during the festival of Vesta in June the sacred store-room was open to the visits of matrons, and at its climax the year's ashes were removed. The Vestals took part in various traditional festivals, most of which seem originally to have an agricultural character, though why on May 15th the Pontifex Maximus and the wife of the Flamen Dialis joined them in a procession of which the climax was throwing straw effigies into the Tiber was as great a mystery to the Romans of the Empire as it is to us. As sacrosanct figures the Vestals were guardians of wills, and were credited even by the sceptical with special powers of intercession—*redimunt vitam populi procrumque salutem* is a Christian poet's description of the pagan belief.[1] Besides a considerable endowment, their privileges included the right to use wheeled vehicles within the City, and special seats at the gladiatoral games, which other women would watch only from the back rows. To us this seems a strange form of entertainment for virgins (as it did to Prudentius in the fourth century), but the reason behind it may be the original sacred character of the games as a sacrifice of captives. The Vestals were not admitted to athletic contests until Nero discovered that this privilege was allowed

to their approximate Greek counterpart, the priestess of Demeter at Olympia, who sat on the altar during the Olympic games.[2]

The Atrium Vestae was adorned with statues of honoured members of the community. A typical inscription says of a mid-third century Chief Vestal (*Virgo Vestalis maxima*) that the state felt daily the effects of her chastity (*disciplina*) and exactitude in fulfilling the sacred rites.[3] The virginity of the Vestals seems to have been valued more as a means of preserving their semi-magical potency as daughters of the State than as a form of ascetic devotion. When Domitian revived the half-forgotten penalty of burial alive for the 'incest' of a Vestal,[4] the Roman world was startled but not apparently shocked. The episode is suggestive of Thomas Cromwell's career as an enforcer of monastic discipline, but it may reflect the supersitition rather than the wickedness of the Emperor. Perhaps as much may be said for the execution of Vestals under Caracalla, though one cannot take very seriously the claim of Elagabalus that he was justified in marrying a Vestal since as a priest he could properly marry a priestess.[5] Besides the Roman Vestals there were similar colleges in other Italian towns. It was for a Vestal of Alba and her lover that, probably in the 370's, Symmachus, the pagan leader of the Roman Senate, petitioned for the establishment of a proper tribunal, though he can scarcely have secured this in the days of Christian Emperors.[6] The Roman college seems to have been respectable enough in its later days, in which it enters briefly into comparison with the virgins of the Church. After the disendowment of Rome paganism by Gratian in 382, Symmachus pleaded for the Vestals as well as for the other pagan institutions in his petition for the restoration of the altar of Victory addressed to Valentinian II in 384. Ambrose and Prudentius rather ungenerously replied that the pagans could only support six or seven virgins (the extra one presumably a novice) at great expense while the Church easily produced hundreds.[7] The only obvious point of similarity would seem to be that virgins and widows were expected to maintain the Church by their prayers.[8] Losing apparently some of its members to the Church, the College of Vestals survived disendowment until the final suppression of public paganism at Rome by Theodosius in 394.[9]

Greece and Egypt

ROME itself does not seem to have had any other fulltime priestesses, although women did offer sacrifice at the strictly female mysteries of the Good Goddess, celebrated in the house of one of the magistrates in December. The wife of the priest of Jupiter, *flamen dialis*, was *flaminica dialis*, and like her husband subject to various obscure taboos. She appeared at some of the festivals celebrated by the Vestals, but was not considered a priestess of Juno as some have

supposed. In Greece matters were somewhat different, since it seemed natural to the Greek mind that a goddess should be served by a priestess. There was some hesitation on the matter, however. A collection of evidence on the subject assembles references to 171 priestesses and 177 priests of various goddesses (while priestesses of gods were very rare, though not entirely unknown).[10] The status of the Greek priestess, like that of the Greek priest, varied. She might be an attendant at the temple, she might be a member of a distinguished family taking part in a civic festival, she might be a child or young woman in a semi-dramatic role. A few examples may serve to illustrate. At Eleusis the priestess of Demeter formally presided at the shrine, although the hierophant who conducted the initiation into the mysteries was more conspicuous. At Delphi the roles were reversed, since the priest of Apollo was the chief figure, but the Pythia (of whom more later) was the voice of the oracle. At Corinth Poseidon was served by a maiden priestess until she was ready for marriage; while in the country at Orchomenus the shrine of Artemis had been attended by a virgin until sad experience indicated that a widow would be safer.[11] At Sparta the young maidens who served the shrine of the Leucippides, daughters of Apollo, were also called Leucippides; at Patrae the virgin selected annually as priestess of Artemis rode behind deer in the procession, and there was a similar impersonation at Tegea.[12] And a rash soul who attempted violent entry into the Acropolis at Athens might be met by the priestess of Athena Polias on her throne, apparently as living representative of the goddess.[13]

Besides the traditional cult priestesses one must note the honorific priesthoods of ruler-cults; the defied females of the Ptolemaic house received honorary priestesses at Alexandria and Ptolemais,[14] and the custom was carried to the Roman world with the deification of Augustus' wife Livia, followed by several imperial ladies of the second century.[15] These offices seem to have been civic distinctions, secured by leading citizens for their debutante daughters, and involved no more serious sacerdotal functions than those of the young ladies carrying baskets who appear in the Parthenon sculptures. The importance of the mysteries devoted to a female deity, the Great Mother and Isis, might have led one to expect a similar importance of women in their cult, but this does not seem to have followed. In Egypt women are found in the lower ranks of the priesthood, the Levites of the Egyptian temples as it were, as singers and dancers—a conspicuous case is that of the twins Thaues and Taus, attached to the Serapeum at Memphis with the duties of pouring libations for the dead and wailing for Apis, who figured in legal proceedings in the second century BC.[16] But the bride of Amon whom Herodotus had heard of at Thebas belonged to the past, and it was centuries before that the later Pharaohs had replaced the highpriest of Amon by a succession of princesses as Divine Votaresses, which seems to have been a means of keeping under their

control a dangerous centre of power which in previous ages had threatened the throne.[17] After all, the cult of Isis was ultimately derived from that of Osiris, and if women were prominent among her worshippers, descriptions, pictures, and documents show her as mainly served by men. There are a few exceptions, such as the female 'interpreter of dreams' who appears at Athens; and several monuments show women in the costume of the goddess carrying her sistrum and rattle.[18] These are probably to be interpreted as patronesses of the cult who were given an honorific position. If they have a parallel in the Church it is to be found in the honourable women for whom a place of distinction was found in the congregation, and who are sometimes called διακονοι or πρεσβυτιδες—from the Phoebe of Romans 16, whom I would put in this category, to the wealthy deaconess Olympias who was one of St. Chrysostom's friends and supporters at Constantinople.[19]

In areas under oriental influence more startling phenomena appear, when the awe inspired by the life-force takes surprising and sometimes disgusting forms. Sacred prostitution existed in Western Asia in ancient times, as in modern India, and was naturally as repulsive to Christians as to Jews in the period with which we are concerned. I suspect, however, that ancient and modern writers have sometimes seen the institution on slight evidence; it is certainly frequently referred to as something practised far away or long ago.[20] Herodotus may have been well-informed when he tells us that at Babylon and in Cyprus women thought it proper to lose their virginity in a temple, and Strabo when he reports the same practice at a shrine of Anaitis in Armenia,[21] but one wonders a bit. However, Lucian reports from his own time that women at Byblos who refused to mourn for Adonis were obliged to give themselves to strangers;[22] and similar customs seem to have survived at Heliopolis (Baalbek) until suppressed by Constantine, although Athanasius refers to sacred prostitution in Phoenicia as a thing of the past.[23] Back in the first century, Strabo doubtless knew the habits of the sacred women of the god Ma at Comana in Pontus near his homeland, to whom he compares the hetaerae of Corinth, sacred to Aphrodite.[24] But he is here referring to old Corinth, destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC, and not to the new Roman colony of his own time. It does not seem that the Corinth of St. Paul and the Rome of St. Peter needed any such cover for their licentiousness; when Juvenal observes in passing 'in front of what temple won't you find a woman?' (*nam quo non prostat femina templo*)[25] he is, I think, referring to the temples of Rome as places of public resort.

Response to inspiration

CLOSER to possible Christian experience are the women who re-

sponded to some form of divine inspiration. In the procession described by Apuleius the female devotees of Isis at Corinth seem to be dignified ladies with perfumed hair and veils. But with references to the Bacchae of the same city Pausanias cautiously observes 'they say the women are sacred and maddened by Dionysus'.[26] As a modern writer puts it, the Bacchae were not priestesses but 'worshippers who stood in a very close relation to the god'. We are not far away in time, place, or phenomenon from the more disorderly aspects of the life of the early Corinthian church. And not far away was the Pythia of Delphi who, in the words of the learned lady just quoted, 'owed her position to the excitable temperament of womanhood' as well as to the water of the sacred spring.[27] Lucian satirically invites us to sympathise with the hard-worked Apollo who had to rush from oracle to oracle 'at the beck of every priestess who has taken her draught of holy water, munched the laurel-leaf, and made the tripod rock', and casually refers to the maddened women to be found with the throng of priests and assistants at the great temple of Hierapolis.[28] More respectfully, Strabo speaks of the θεοφερητοι, those carried away by divinity, at the Cappadocian shrines—we are not very far here from Ignatius of Antioch who was also θεοφορος—and mentions that at Castabala the priestesses of 'Perasian Artemis' walked barefoot over coals,[29] a performance to which there are of course modern parallels in various parts of the world. From this Anatolian world have arisen both Christian and Moslem representatives of the 'enthusiasm' which the eighteenth century so much deplored, and in which women have had their part. One thinks of the prophetesses who were supporters, almost colleagues, of the Phrygian heresiarch Montanus, and of the nameless third century woman, the Joanna Southcott or Aimee Semple Macpherson of her time, who claimed by prophetic authority to organise her own sect in which she professed to administer the rites of the Church, including both Baptism and the Eucharist. We know of her because in writing to Cyprian Bishop Firmilian of Caesarea quoted this as an instance of heretical baptism which could not possibly be valid.[30] Probably from the same area came the Marcosian Gnostic who according to Irenaeus imposed on the silly women of Gaul by the impressive ceremonies in which he invited some of them to bless lesser cups, and then himself made the eucharistic cup turn pink, presumably by the addition of some chemical.[31]

Early Christians

IF we ask why the early Church did not invite women to preside at the Eucharist, the most definitely priestly act of the Christian ministry, the answer undoubtedly is that for a number of reasons the idea never occurred to it. Ceremonially the ἐπισκοπος at the Eucharist succeeds

to the Jewish *paterfamilias* saying grace; and spiritually to the Jewish priest presenting offerings to the Lord in a religion which did not know priestesses, though it did recognise that prophetic inspiration could come to either sex. Such formal discussion as we find in ancient Christian writers seems to revolve around the question whether a woman might conceivably administer Baptism, probably because they were used to solemn baptisms celebrated by the Bishop and his attending presbyters, with deacons and (in some places at least) deaconesses assisting in the actual undressing and immersion of the candidates. Tertullian suggests that if heresy were unrestrained, it might lead to women's venturing to exorcise and baptise;[32] Firmilian tells us that this actually occurred, as noted, and Epiphanius of Salamis includes in his magnificent catalogue of heresies a branch of the Montanists who had female presbyters and bishops.[33] In the mid-third century the author of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* argues that the duty of widows was to pray, not to teach or baptise; and a century later the editor of the *Apostolic Constitutions* enlarges this passage with the note that while women might visit the sick and lay hands on them, the Church did not have priestesses, unlike the Gentiles with their female deities.[34] Finally, in the late fourth century Epiphanius takes up the ministry of women when at the end of his collection of heresies he comes to the Collyridians, a sect of Thracian origin whose women had the curious custom of offering cakes to the Virgin Mary. Besides pointing out that Mary is venerated but not worshipped, he observes that neither under the old covenant or the new was the priestly office given to women, although the possibility of a female prophet was guaranteed by the case of the four daughters of Philip the Evangelist (Acts 21: 9). Surely no one in the Church was more deserving of honour than Mary, yet it was the Apostles who first celebrated the Eucharist and John the Baptist who baptised her Son. In his own time the Church used the ministry of deaconesses, primarily he thinks for attendance on female candidates at Baptism, but if it did call some women πρεσβυτιδες this is an honorary rank and does not make them female presbyters or priestesses.[35] And what Epiphanius stated remained the general attitude of the Church.

Notes

[1] Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* ii. 1104; on the Vestals see J. P. V. Balsdon, *Roman Women*, 1962, pp. 235-242; W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic*, 1899, *s.v.*; Thomas Cato Worsfold, *The History of the Vestal Virgins of Rome*, a scrappy but useful collection of information.

[2] Suetonius, *Augustus* 44. 3; *Nero* 12. 4; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, vi. 20,9.

[3] Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* 4932.
[4] Suetonius, *Domitian* 8,4; Pliny the Younger, *Epistolae* iv.11.
[5] Herodian, *Ab Excessu Divi Marci* iv. 6,4; v. 6,2.
[6] Symmachus, *Epistolae* ix. 147-8.
[7] Ambrose, *Epistolae* 18. 11-12, replying to Symmachus, *Relatio ad Valentinianum;* Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* ii. 910-1,132.
[8] cf., Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 11; *Didascalia Apostolorum* 14 and 15.
[9] The pagan Zosimus (v. 38) ends their history with a story of the last Vestal's curse, against the wife of Stilicho.
[10] Elizabeth Sinclair Holderman, *A Study of the Greek Priestess*, Michigan, 1913, p. 8.
[11] Pausanias ii. 33,2; vii. 5,11.
[12] Pausanias vii. 18,12; viii. 53,3.
[13] Herodotus, *History* v. 72.
[14] W. Otto, *Priester und Templel im hellenistischen Aegypten*, vol. i, 1905, pp. 157-8, 162-3; list of known incumbents pp. 185-193, 195-6.
[15] Balsdon, *op. cit.* pp. 243, 249-251.
[16] Otto, *op. cit.* pp. 92-3, 102-3; cf., Edwyn Bevan, *A History of Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty*, 1927, pp. 297-8.
[17] Herodotus i. 182; cf., Hermann Kees, *Das Priestertum im Agyptischen Staat vom neuen Reich bis zur Spätzeit*, 1953, pp. 203-5.
[18] cf., Georges Lafarge, *Historie du Culte des Divinites d'Alexandria*, 1884, pp. 139-40, monuments 85-89, 113-115.
[19] Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, viii. 9.
[20] J. G. Frazer, *Adonis Attis Osiris*, 3rd ed. 1914, chapters 3-4, assembles and I think somewhat exaggerates the evidence.
[21] Herodotus i. 199; Strabo, *Geography* xi. 14,16.
[22] *De Dea Syria* 6.
[23] Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* iii. 58; Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 26.
[24] Strabo xii. 3,36.
[25] *Satires* ix. 24.
[26] Apuleius, *Golden Ass* xi. 10; Pausanias ii. 7,5.
[27] Holderman, *op. cit.* p. 19.
[28] *Bis Accusatus* 1; *De Dea Syria* 43.
[29] xii. 2,3 and 7; 3,32.
[30] Firmilian's letter in Cyprian, *Epistolae* 74 (75) 10-11.
[31] *Adversus Haereses* i. 13.
[32] *De Praescriptione* 41.
[33] *Panarion*, Heresy 49.2.
[34] *Didascalia* 15, expanded in *Apostolic Constititions* iii. 9.
[35] *Panarion*, Heresy 79. 2-4; doubtless to avoid such confusions the Council of Laodicea (c. 350?) had ordered that no more πρεσβυτιδες be appointed (Canon 11).