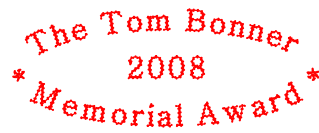


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Ancient Inequality
and the Development of Our
Sexual Caste System

By
Eric Bell

Dr. Mille
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Ancient Inequality and the Development of our Sexual Caste System

Although not perfect, great strides have been made in gender equality. One can see the development of these advancements by looking at accounts and stories of our ancient world and the dawn of written word. To look further into this, we will be examining selections from Homer's *The Iliad*, selections from the Old Testament, the account of Gilgamesh, and ancient Egyptian poetry, along with scholarly evidence which documents the sexual inequalities experienced by the female gender from that time period.

As is known of the ancient world, women were viewed as the property of men once areas and resources began to be claimed by ruling parties. To look into the evidence of this we will inspect the aforementioned selections in a chronological order beginning with the epic of Gilgamesh. The oldest written story known to humankind, it revolves around Gilgamesh, the ruler of ancient Uruk located in present day Iraq (namesake for said country). Translated from cuneiform characters, the story focuses on his quest for immortality and his relationship with Enkidu. The epic is rife with sexual inequality right from the beginning. The sole purpose of Enkidu's creation was the response of the gods to Uruk's men who cried, "Gilgamesh sounds the tocsin for his amusement, his arrogance has no bounds by day or night. No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all, even the children; yet the king should be a shepherd to his people. His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior's daughter nor the wife of a noble; yet this is the shepherd of the city" ("Gilgamesh" 13). As mentioned, Enkidu was created to be a foil to the king, however to make him "civilized," we come to another instance of an ancient sexual caste system. At the urging of a trapper, Gilgamesh sends a prostitute to tame him, hoping "a wanton from the temple of love . . . [will] overpower the man . . . [when he sees

her] stripped naked” (“Gilgamesh” 14). The fact that temples are set up to host the prostitutes is a clear view of the acceptance and servitude status of women in that time.

What is important to understand of this very early time period is that there were two types of prostitutes in city areas. The first of these types was, as Gerda Lerner explains, “temple prostitution” (238) – which came from the needs of the people to take care of the gods of a temple. This contained activities of all facets of life, which “included, in some cases, offering them sexual services” (Lerner 239). The second kind of prostitution was one which grew out of the former type and an age-old need to gain capital: “commercial prostitution” (Lerner 247). Gifts were given to the temple prostitutes, Lerner notes, for the services they rendered to the gods (although to be more accurate, the services were rendered to men). As Lerner theorizes, “this practice corrupted some of the temple servants, tempting them to keep all or some of these gifts for their own profit” (244), and ergo commercial prostitution was born. With the peoples of the region conquering new lands and slaves, some saw an opportunity to “cash in” on the women as new “articles of commerce” and commercial prostitution became a thriving business.

Returning to “Gilgamesh,” the trapper goes on to command the woman to strip down and make love to Enkidu. While the role of the temple prostitute was one which none at the time would have considered demeaning in nature, the commandments set forth by the trapper are demeaning in a showing of a loss of personal freedom and rights as seen when he says, “Now woman, make your breasts bare, have no shame, do not delay but welcome his love. Let him see you naked, let him possess your body. When he comes near uncover your body and lie with him” (“Gilgamesh” 14). Upon Enkidu’s death, he curses the woman who civilized him telling her “you shall not keep house with other girls in the tavern, but do your business in places fouled by the vomit of the drunkard” (“Gilgamesh” 27). Lerner expands on this venomous line stating

that “the nature of this curse tells us that the [temple prostitute] who mated with Enkidu lived a much easier and better life than the [commercial prostitute] who has to stand at the town wall and is abused by her drunken customers” (246). This statement gives further proof of the theory of the different types of prostitutes in the time of ancient Mesopotamia. Although he later recants the curses, the epic paints a dark picture of the status of women in this time.

Remaining focused on the inequalities, in lieu of the more pleasant themes of the time period, brings us to the unearthing of the basic assumptions of masculinity preceding femininity which are held in the books of Judeo-Christian faith. Areas of interest to look at are the gender of god, the creation story, and the story of Joseph found in Genesis. In both of these stories, from what most of the western world declares as a source of peace and hope, the attitude towards women is quite the opposite. Of the three different accounts of Genesis, the Yahwist, Elohist, and Priestly, none fare well for the women involved in the stories. The attitude of “male over female” is apparent in several examples, the first of which being the gender of god. Jumping ahead to include the New Testament as well, Mary Daly delves into this question of gender and expands on it with the idea of the trinity, which she points out is all male. While the obvious Father and Son are male, the one Daly questions is the “Holy Spirit” (82). Daly says “this naming of ‘the three Divine Persons’ is the paradigmatic model for the pseudogeneric term *person*, excluding all female mythic presence, denying female reality in the cosmos” (82), adding that a “male made-up femininity has nothing to do with women” (82). This, she says, is because of the patriarchal system of old, in which the father is the supreme authority of the community, and that system of old is in place because “women are the objects of male terror” (Daly 83).

Something of interest that Elaine H. Pagels investigates is the fact that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the only religions “with no female divinity” (293). She goes on to say

that many of those who disagree say that God is asexual, “yet [in contrast with that statement] the actual language they use daily in worship and prayer conveys a different message and gives the distinct impression that God is thought of in exclusively masculine terms” (Pagels 293).

Like Daly, Pagels also makes the argument that while the Holy Spirit of the trinity is not male, it certainly isn't female either.

The second example of a sexual caste system in Genesis is the idea that man was here before woman and woman was made from man, as one can see when “[god] took one of [Adam’s] ribs and...made he a woman and brought her unto man” (“Genesis” 58). Richard Harvey looks into the order of creation and the subsequent presumption of how woman fits into the picture. He states that “although, Adam had been made from dust, he was dignified by having been made in the image of God. Eve’s situation, on the other hand, was somewhat more problematic” (Harvey 3). Harvey goes on to look into the questions of what the writer’s purpose was for Eve – as vessel for pro-creation or perhaps “to serve the companionship needs of Adam” (3). Either way, the book of Genesis makes it clear that man, and not woman, was created in the image of god. Something of interest to note in the creation story is that the two versions it gives are starkly different in regards to female status. The first account states that man and woman were created in chorus, male and female, both in God’s image (“Genesis” 57), while the second states the above evidence. This contradiction shows a curious, small voice trying to be recognized – sadly, as one reads on we see this voice stamped out and the second account supersede the first.

Another important aspect of sexual inequality in the creation story is how Eve is portrayed to be a temptress when “she took of the fruit therefore, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat” (“Genesis” 58), and in turn Adam blames her for eating

from the tree of knowledge saying, “The woman thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat” (“Genesis” 59). Katherine Rogers interprets the writing as an ancient set up for the servitude of women. She says, “The serpent misled the woman, as the less intelligent and virtuous human; and then she misled her husband. If she had not yielded, he would not have yielded and thus brought misery on all his posterity. Adam's primary fault, indeed, was hearkening to the voice of his wife” (Rogers). Rogers goes on to cite the writings of St. Paul, which state that the fall began with Eve and “without the Fall there would have been no need for redemption by Christ.”

The theme of woman as a moral-lacking temptress is apparent again in the story of Joseph. While the role of females is nearly nonexistent, the only one with any slight bit of depth is that of Joseph’s Egyptian master’s wife. She is portrayed to the reader again as a seductive temptress with no consideration of moral standings in regards to cheating on her husband as is recounted by the writer saying, “And it came to pass after these things, that his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and said, Lie with me” (“Genesis” 68). As one can see, the social standing of the female gender depicted may not be that of a prostitute but still one lacking of respect and rights.

This leads us to the third and final literary evidence of gender inequality of old. Homer’s *The Iliad*, this well known poem of the classical antiquity era, concerns itself with the warring Trojans and Achaeans. While one could go on for ages with the gender injustices illustrated in this epic, two are most interesting: the female war prizes and role of women in ancient Greece. As Caroline Dewald writes, many “believe that women in classical Greece were in fact treated little better than slaves, locked in the ignorance and superstition of their scanty education, and locked almost literally in the dark inner rooms of the *oikos* in which they were condemned to

spend their adult lives” (11). Dewald’s preceding lines set one up for the beginning of Homer’s epic as we are introduced to Achilles and Agamemnon and their spoils of battle, two of Troy’s daughters, Chryseis and Briseis. In tradition with ancient warfare (and even some modern), the victors of a battle would generally kill the men, take the women and father more children through them, thus exterminating their advisory’s clan, tribe, etc. As the beginning of the story unfolds both men are reluctant to give up what is “rightfully” theirs, the women.

This status of women is visible again in the dialogue between Troy’s hero, Hector, and his wife when he describes what life will be like for her if Troy is not victorious, explaining to her that “when some brazen Argive hales you off in tears, / wrenching away your day of light and freedom! / Then far off in the land of Argos you must live / laboring at a loom, at another woman’s beck and call, / fetching water at some spring...” (Homer 144-45). The above lines also bring one back to the earlier mentioned commercial prostitution issue where “military conquest led . . . to the enslavement and sexual abuse of captive women” (Lerner 247). The fact that women were viewed as a commodity is seen also as Agamemnon realizes his mistake of angering Achilles. In a move to appease the great fighter’s rage Agamemnon sends an envoy to present Achilles with a wealth of gifts and prizes. He tells the representatives “Seven women I’ll give him, flawless, skilled in crafts, / women of Lesbos . . . / . . . and choose for his pleasure twenty Trojan women / second only to Argive Helen in their glory Three daughters are mine in my well-built halls – / Chrysothemis and Laodice and Iphianassa – / and he may lead away whichever one he likes” (Homer 150-51). While Achilles initially refuses his offer, the fate and lives of those and many other women in that period were destined to a world of rule and servitude.

Dewald gives further proof of this Greek oppressive tradition towards females by examining another Greek work, Herodotus' *Histories*, which "after all, open[s] with an account of four mythical rapes, [and] women abducted over long distance" (17). She goes on to say that "the attitudes and anxieties Greek men felt about women [are] also significant for our understanding of women's role in society" (17). This attitude was held by the majority of Greek men including some of the founding figures of Western philosophy, most notably Aristotle, who was "usually condemned as straightforwardly misogynistic" (Katz 513). While the mentality that Aristotle had was not held by all, but certainly the majority of Greek men, Marilyn A. Katz confirms what has already been written here, stating that "the ancient Athenian city-state [was] a 'men's club'" in which women had no role, voice, or rights" (514).

Probably one of the most disturbing illustrations of misogyny comes from Diogenes Laertius, the biographer of ancient Greek philosophers who lived between 200 and 500 AD. Eva Cantarella writes, "one day...while strolling among the olive groves [he] saw several hanged maidens swinging from the trees. At this sight he exclaimed: 'If only all trees bore such fruit'" (91). The shocking Greek accounts do not stop there as one can see from "Hippolytus' invective against woman in Euripides' tragedy of the same name: 'Oh Zeus, whatever possessed you to put an ambiguous misfortune amongst men by bringing women to the light of day? If you really wanted to sow the race of mortals, why did it have to be born of women?...'" (Cantarella 91). Cantarella compiles many of the gross abuses which depict the frequency of this strong prejudice and hatred against women in the time of ancient Greece. One last example she feels necessary to point out is the account of Tartarus of Thessaly, who would "[send] his soldiers to capture maidens and bring them back to the palace where he would rape them" (Cantarella 93),

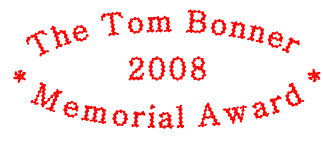
confirming the misogynistic climate women experienced in ancient Greece. Cantarella thus concludes that “misogyny not infrequently reached levels of particular intensity” (91).

In all these early works which substantiate the sexual caste system of old, one glimmer of light is evident in some of the ancient Egyptian love poems dating to the Ramesside period of 1300-1100 B.C. The poems are written from both perspectives of man and woman, a refreshing difference in female portrayal compared to that of a harlot, temptress and article of trade and war. Here one can see the inner thoughts of a woman which drive forward the independence and personal freedom they must have wished for. In “I Was Simply Off To See Nefrus My Friend” the age old nervousness of love resonates as loud today as it did then with lines like “Don’t let him see me! / Where can I hide. . . ? / . . . If he sees that I see him, I know / he will know how my heart flutters” (“Ancient Egyptian Poetry” 51). Unlike the other ancient cultures examined here, the Egyptians were the closest to a civilization of equal rights. Egyptian women enjoyed the same legal status as men and “both men and women could act on their own” (Johnson). This extended to property ownership as well, as Janet Johnson states, “Egyptian women were able to acquire, to own, and to dispose of property (both real and personal) in their own name,” a privilege virtually unheard of in the ancient world. While the status of the Egyptian woman seems to be an oasis in a desert of inequality, Johnson is quick to point out that “the social and public role of women was vastly different than that of men.” The women were generally in charge of affairs of the home and rarely, if ever, held any positions or jobs in public view. Women were also bought from fathers to be brides, a tradition more akin to the archaic practices of the other cultures mentioned here. While the male/female gender equality issues were significantly less than their ancient counterparts, the real segregation occurred on the level of coffin of the oppressive climate in which women lived is up to the reader.

In our day and age this atmosphere of domination is almost unthinkable in most places. While our society's sexual caste system is by no means perfect with the mentality of some being that of having women here to do the cooking and raising kids, to the glass ceiling effect felt in the workplace, one can see the beginnings of this way of thought, its development, and hopefully the slight bits of progress from looking at these selected works.

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