

Women's Roles in the Letters to Timothy and Titus

BY MONA TOKAREK LAFOSSE

The letters to Timothy and Titus reveal a growing consciousness about reputation in early Christian communities. Behavior that outsiders might find distasteful—especially the behavior of women—could be perceived as immoral, compromising the honor of the group. How do these observations (and prescriptions) bear on the present?

Women's roles in the letters to Timothy and Titus appear troubling at best. There are references to old wives' tales (1 Timothy 4:7) and women "gadding about from house to house" (1 Timothy 5:13), taken "captive" by those who spread a false faith (2 Timothy 3:6). They are admonished not to be gossips and drunks (Titus 2:3), not to live sensually (1 Timothy 5:6), and not to braid their hair or wear jewelry (1 Timothy 2:9). According to these letters, women should love their husbands, bear children, manage their households (Titus 2:4-5; 1 Timothy 5:14), and remain silent, not teaching or exercising authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12)—a statement apparently justified by the sins of Eve (2:13-14). It is difficult not to see these texts as promoting a patriarchal view of women's roles.

Yet, alongside the negative portrayals of women in these letters, certain women are given special, even honorable, positions: mothers and grandmothers (2 Timothy 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:2, 4), older women who instruct younger ones (Titus 2:3-5), "real" widows (1 Timothy 5:3, 16), old widows (1 Timothy 5:9-10), a woman who "has widows" (1 Timothy 5:16), and women associated with the role of deacon (1 Timothy 3:11).

The historical and cultural context of these letters can sharpen our perception of what they say about the relation of older and younger women

in certain early Christian communities, and help us reflect on how those observations (and prescriptions) might bear on the present.

READING THE LETTERS IN CONTEXT

The authorship of these letters has been disputed for well over a century.¹ The tone, vocabulary, style, theology, and apparent circumstances of the letters to Timothy and Titus are quite different from the letters that Paul wrote in the 50s and 60s. Thus, many scholars have posited that they were not written by Paul, but by a later admirer of Paul who wanted to bring Paul's voice and authority to a later set of crises. Though they cannot be dated with any certainty, there is some agreement that these letters were written around the end of the first century. It was a time of crisis, when the founders of many early Christian communities had grown old or died, and a new generation of believers had conflicting ideas about how they should live as followers of Jesus.

The possibility that these letters were not written by Paul may lead some modern readers to dismiss them, or ascribe to them less scriptural importance than Paul's undisputed letters. Yet, their inclusion in the New Testament and their relevance to the present cannot be discounted.

Another crucial aspect in studying these letters is to consider the cultural and social context of early Christian women. Entering the social world of Christians in the late first and early second centuries is for us a cross-cultural experience. We encounter a way of thinking that is quite unlike modern Western worldviews. In the letters of Paul, for example, we are reading the thought of a man who was a first-century Jew, steeped in the traditions and perspectives of a certain kind of Judaism presented to Gentiles in the common Greek language of his day, who formulated arguments on the basis of conventions of ancient rhetoric and letter writing. Likewise, in the letters to Timothy and Titus, we glimpse how an unnamed admirer of Paul struggles to address problems in certain Christian communities for which he feels intensely responsible. They are by a man with particular perspectives; women are described and indirectly addressed but not given a voice. Thus, reading what he writes about women entails considering the male values and male assumptions about women and gender roles embedded in what he says.²

Finally, no matter how well-informed we might be as readers, we never read a text with complete impartiality. Our assumptions and experiences, some of which overlap with the long history of interpretation and application of the texts of the New Testament, are always part of our reading. As a historian, I bring certain assumptions and biases to reading the texts. While my historical reading is an attempt to access an accurate picture of the ancient world on the basis of solid research, as a reader I cannot escape the fact that what I choose to research, the questions I ask, and the way I see the texts is influenced by my own questions and life experiences.

The potential roles for me as a woman today, both relational and vocational, encompass a much larger range of possibilities than the roles for women in

the ancient Mediterranean world. Yet, there are similarities. Like many women then, I am at least partly defined by my familial roles of daughter, sister, wife, aunt, and mother, and relationships with female friends and colleagues who do not fit neatly into such categories. While some women, both then and now, possess other important identities and fulfill other roles in society, some women have fewer choices.

THE LIFE OF WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

In the ancient Mediterranean, a girl of the non-elite classes was educated primarily in household duties by her mother and other female kin. She was expected to marry a man of her parents' choosing in her late teen years. The marriage arrangements included a dowry, probably consisting of the household items she would need, like linen and kitchenware, prepared by the young woman and her female kin. Her husband was often five to ten years her elder. In the urban centers of the Roman Empire, a young bride most likely lived near to her natal kin. If her family had any property, it legally belonged to her first family rather than the family into which she married.

Since life expectancy for children was rather dismal, she could expect half of her children to die before their tenth year. Since few adults grew to old age, the threshold of which would be about sixty, she could expect her parents to die sometime in her twenties or thirties, and her grandparents long before that. She was likely to be widowed, perhaps more than once. If she was still of childbearing age, she was expected to remarry. If she was past childbearing, she would likely remain alone, hoping to support herself or receive support from her adult children.

If she was fortunate enough to see her children grow to adulthood, marry, and have children, she would become a mother-in-law and grandmother. It was this stage of her life, in her late forties and fifties, beyond childbearing and childrearing and having cultivated her reputation, that she commanded the most respect from her family and possessed the most social power within her life course. If she grew into old age, she might remain fairly active until ailments drew her life to a close, having no equivalents to modern medicine or aids to prolong life or bring relief.³

This general picture of the female life-course provides a backdrop to the roles of women in early Christian communities. Since the household was the site of early Christian gatherings, women must have played increasingly important roles as they aged, for the household was the domain of women.⁴

OLDER AND YOUNGER WOMEN IN TITUS 2:3-5

Since Paul's authorship is doubtful, it is helpful to think of the letter to Titus as a fictive portrayal—a story of a fictive Paul and a fictive Titus, written in a letter form.⁵ "Paul" uses his authority to instruct "Titus" on how to direct a post-Pauline community in the author's own time. (For simplicity, I often refer to these fictive characters simply as Paul and Titus in what follows.) We learn that the community believes in Jesus as their savior (3:3-7), but has

encountered divergent teachings (1:9) associated with particular interpretations of Jewish law, apparently in regard to what is clean and unclean (1:10-16; cf. 3:9-11). The letter is an attempt to elucidate what the author understands to be healthy teaching (1:9, 2:1; cf. 1:8).

Paul admonishes Titus to "speak what is fitting for healthy teaching" (2:1, my translation), with authority to exhort and rebuke (2:15). He then gives a list of what it is "fitting" to pursue and avoid by older men (2:2), older women and younger women (2:3-5), younger men (2:6), and slaves (2:9-10; the gender of slaves was irrelevant to their social status, but we can assume he meant male and female slaves). "Fitting" behavior promoted a good reputation of the community (2:5, 8, 10); in this way, members would have honor, unlike those who are promoting the divergent teachings (1:11). The desire to maintain honor is one reason why those who continue to promote division should be spurned (3:10-11).

Honor was a pivotal cultural value in the ancient Mediterranean.⁶ The group, especially the family, counted more than the individual. Honor represented the reputation of a person and the person's family, especially as it was measured against and perceived by other families or individuals. Women and men had different roles in this system. Generally speaking, men were expected to defend family honor in the face of public challenges or threats; women were expected to embody family honor by their modest, chaste, and submissive behavior. Honorable behavior was expected of all family members in order for the household to remain honorable in the eyes of others.

Gender, class, and age were important in determining how people would conduct themselves in social situations. Household codes (such as Ephesians 5:21-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1) described ideal public behavior of family members: a wife was to be deferential to her husband, children were to be deferential to their parents, and slaves were to be deferential to their masters. Children were to respect their parents and grandparents, caring for them in their old age; parents were expected to provide for their children, including an inheritance if they were able. This included more than material provision. In 2 Timothy 1:5, for example, the author portrays Timothy's faith as having been passed down from his grandmother and mother.

Age hierarchy was evident along gender lines: younger men deferred to older men (unless there was an obvious class difference, so that an older male slave would defer to his master's adult son), and younger women deferred to older women. Age hierarchy among women appears to have been an important foundation of early Christian communities. In Titus 2:3-5, we glimpse aspects of women's roles that reflect this cultural norm.

According to Paul, the behavior of older women is to be similar to that of older men (2:2-3): they are to be "holy in behavior, not slanderous, not enslaved to much wine, teachers of what is excellent" (2:3, my translation). In the literature of the ancient world, an older woman is often stereotyped either as a hag who could compromise honor through shameful behavior

such as gossiping and drunkenness (the two prohibitions listed here), or as an ideal matron who embodied the honor of her family by exemplary virtue.⁷

Given the importance of “teaching” in Titus, the fact that the author highlights older women as “teachers of what is excellent” (all one word in Greek, *kalodidaskaloi*) is noteworthy. Their pupils are specified as younger women (2:4-5). Note that the older men, older women, younger men, and slaves are groups that Paul suggests Titus should address, but the younger women form a subset to be addressed, not by Titus, but by the older women. This kind of gendered age structure, in which older women are responsible for younger women, is common in many cultures.⁸

These older women could be mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts, grandmothers (less likely, given life expectancy in the ancient world), or other older women who acted as surrogate mothers or patrons to younger women. In a second-century Christian story, a young woman named Thecla is supported emotionally and financially by a surrogate mother, Queen Tryphaena, as she faces martyrdom (*Acts of Paul and Thecla*). In Acts 9:36-41, Tabitha’s good works and acts of mercy may be part of her role as patron to younger women around her.

Patronage, an important aspect of ancient Mediterranean culture, was an informal system in which persons of greater wealth and precedence would act as patrons for their clients. Both patron and client entered the relationship voluntarily, but the bond was usually long-term. The patron provided financial support, stability, protection, and other benefits; in return, the client was loyal, proclaiming the patron’s honor, and providing services when needed. An older woman past childbearing age would be in a good position to offer patronage to younger women, especially if she had some wealth. In a first-century memorial inscription called the *Laudatio Turiae* (“in praise of Turia”), a man recalls how his childless wife mothered her female kin, taking them into her home and providing them with dowries for good marriages (11.44-49).

In Titus, the older women seem to be encouraged to assume such a role. They are to teach by example, with self-control, modesty, and wisdom (implied by the verb *sophronizō*; 2:4). They should teach *behavior*, namely that which is honorable and ideal for married women in the ancient world: loving their husbands, loving their children, being modest and pure and good managers of their homes, and being submissive to their husbands. Since women’s modest behavior embodied the honor of their community, these behaviors reflected well-ordered, reputable families and communities. It is evident that the community’s reputation was important, for the author adds a reason why older women are to teach younger women these things: so that the “word of God” (that is, the message that comes from the healthy teaching; 1:9) would not be criticized or maligned (2:5). The author repeats this call for honorable behavior to avoid outside criticism two more times in this section (2:8, 10). In other words, dishonorable behavior could compromise the honor of the group, but honorable behavior embodies the healthy teaching.

WIDOWS, REPUTATION, AND "PROPER" BEHAVIOR

As in the case of Titus, I read the first letter of Timothy as a portrayal of a fictive Paul writing to his fictive younger colleague, Timothy. (Again, for simplicity, I will refer to them as Paul and Timothy). The author's goal is to address problems in a post-Pauline community that are divisive (1:19-20; 4:1-2; 6:3-5), related to problematic teaching (1:3-7, 6:3-5, 20-21), and compromising the reputation of the community (5:14; cf. 3:7). He outlines "how one ought to behave in the household of God" (3:15), a favorite metaphor for his community of Jesus followers. The author is adamant that what he deems *proper* behavior—behavior expected among members of a household in the ancient Mediterranean—should govern the behavior of the community. Proper behavior would serve two purposes: to combat the "other" teaching that was going on within the community (1:3-7; 4:1-3), and to refute negative views of the group from the perspective of outsiders (3:7; 5:14). It seems that the "other" teaching was promoting behavior that was threatening the reputation of the group.

The categories of people in 1 Timothy 5:1-2 resembles the list in Titus 2:2-6, dividing the community into older and younger men and women. These two verses form an apt introduction to the sections that follow on older and younger women (5:3-16) and older and younger men (5:17-25). The lengthy section on women's roles is an enigmatic section of the letter, but one that fits well with the author's appeal to behave properly in the household of God. The main problem seems

to hinge on how outsiders might (or did) perceive women in the community. Since women embodied the reputation of the group, their behavior was crucial.

The rhetoric of this section might help us understand the historical situation. Sometimes Paul exhorts Timothy, issuing him specific commands to speak kindly to an older man (5:1), honor real widows (5:3), proclaim these things (5:7), and inter-

cede for young widows (5:11)⁹. At other times, Paul directs third parties through Timothy. These are times when the author provides a glimpse into his own late first-century situation, and especially his concerns about how women's roles play a part in the community's reputation. A widow's children and grandchildren are to repay her (with care; 5:4); if someone does not care for one's own, that person is worse than an unbeliever (5:8); let an exemplary

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widow be put on a list (5:9); and if some believing woman has widows, let her care for them, so that the community might be free to care for the real widows (5:16).

The “real widows” are the bookends of this section: they are alone (5:5) and need the help of the community (5:16). The problems, however, are with those who do not care for their own, especially those in their own households (5:8).

This lack of care comes in two forms. First, there are those who should be providing care to their widowed mothers and grandmothers, but apparently are neglecting their duty (5:4). In ancient Roman society, filial piety was a prime cultural value; adult children always cared for their parents. Neglect of a parent was seen as scandalous. According to 5:8, even an unbeliever would not do such a thing! Such neglect among members of the Jesus community would reflect poorly on the community as a whole in the eyes of outsiders.

Even more troubling was the situation of the younger widows (5:11-15). They are clearly posing a threat to the community’s reputation: they are idle, go from household to household, say things they should not be saying, and are being led astray. Paul says he wishes these women to assume roles that are proper and honorable for young women of that culture: marry, bear children, and manage a household (5:14). These roles are very similar to the ones we saw in Titus 2:4-5, where the establishment of younger women’s roles involved older women.

At the conclusion of the section on younger widows in 5:11-15, the author highlights the “believing woman who has widows” (5:16, my translation). This is the pinnacle of his argument and is best understood as a believing woman who has *younger* widows as her responsibility – perhaps as their mother, female kin, or patron. That is, older women, who properly had responsibility for younger widows, are not fulfilling their responsibilities – namely, finding marriage matches and dowries to make sure the young widows got remarried.

The role the young women play in compromising the community’s reputation (5:13-14) is linked to another problem. As sexually awakened women without husbands, they do not fit into a “normal” category of women. In the ancient world, a woman was normally married through her childbearing years, even if that meant remarrying after being widowed or divorced. The author of 1 Timothy states that “when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry,” but this desire constitutes a breach of their “first faith” or “first pledge” (5:11-12). Yet, Paul says he wants them to marry (5:14)! The role of the older women makes sense of this apparent paradox. Perhaps some of the older women, convinced by the “other” teaching that “forbade marriage” (4:3), are counseling younger widows against remarriage, despite the young widows’ desire to remarry (5:11; cf. 2 Timothy 3:6). Without older women to help them with the process, perhaps the young widows are looking for new husbands themselves, outside of the faith community and the normal channels, and are being perceived as “gadding about.”

The meaning of 5:11 is critical in thinking about this text. Most commentators and translations suggest that younger widows are to be denied a place on the list in 5:9, meaning that they are not eligible for charity, or not eligible to be part of an "order of widows" (a later office that is not obvious in this early text). But "intercede for" as a translation of the word (Greek: *paraitou*) lends itself more clearly to the context where Timothy is told to "honor widows who are really widows" (5:3) and "intercede for younger widows" (5:11, my translation). The believing woman would take care of them, as she properly should, leaving the church to care for the real widows (5:16). The direction to "enlist" an exemplary widow who is over sixty (5:9) is meant as a measuring stick for older women. Such a woman would be honored, as if her name was placed on a list of honored members of the community, for her lifetime of virtuous deeds (5:10). She would be a model of admirable behavior, especially a model for older women who are neglecting their responsibility.

In sum, the real problem was primarily the behavior of a group of older women, swayed by the "other" teachings, and neglecting their responsibilities. By abandoning their duties to the young women in their care, the young women were being perceived as behaving in dishonorable ways. Perhaps these older women are the ones that the author perceives as "living luxuriously" (5:6, my translation), and dressing in expensive clothes with braided hair (2:9). Perhaps he harshly condemns them not to teach or have authority over a man (2:11-12) because, in his mind, they are being led astray, and leading others astray. And it may be their "old wives' tales" that he has Paul warn Timothy about in this letter (4:7).

WOMEN IN 1 TIMOTHY 3:11

There is one other group of women that receives much less attention in 1 Timothy than those already mentioned. In a section on *diakono*i (a word that literally means "servant," but here suggests a specific role in the community; it is often translated "deacon"), one sentence mentions "women" (*gunaikai*) (3:11). Whether these are wives of deacons or female deacons has been a matter of debate, but there is good evidence to suggest they were female deacons. The word *diakon*os is used of Phoebe in Romans 16:1, who is also clearly a patron to Paul, and a woman of honorable reputation.

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul outlines who qualifies as an overseer and *diakon*os, listing qualities of character rather than function.¹⁰ The characteristics that are listed in 3:11 are not particularly feminine ones, but ones that all community members, and especially those in special roles, should exhibit. Such a woman should be worthy of respect (like older men in Titus 2:2, and deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8), not slanderous (a prohibition listed for older women in Titus 2:3), and self-controlled (also used of older men in Titus 2:2). She is also to be faithful in all things, as Paul himself is (1 Timothy 1:12). Those who are faithful are those who know the truth, not being deceived by the "other" teaching (1 Timothy 4:3, 10). Faithful people are those entrusted to teach in

the community (2 Timothy 2:2). The same word for “faithful” is used for the “believing [or faithful] woman who has widows” (1 Timothy 5:16).¹¹ Thus, there were important roles for women in the community, if they embraced and embodied characteristics and behavior consistent with their faith.

CONCLUSION

The letters to Timothy and Titus reveal a growing consciousness about reputation in early Christian communities. Behavior that outsiders might notice and find distasteful—especially the behavior of women—could be perceived as immoral, compromising the honor of the group.

Today, women’s experiences of their familial, social, vocational, and ecclesial roles are often much more diverse than the depiction of women in these letters. Given women’s efforts, past and present, to overcome a history of patriarchy, it is difficult not to take offense at the patriarchal nature of what these letters have to say about women. While the author highlights the value of certain women with age, experience, modesty, and responsibility for others, his stance is one of a male authority figure—Paul—whose advice infers that he knows what is best for women. We hear nothing of what these women might have thought.

How different is this from modern times? There are still men, some in prominent positions, who think they know what is best for women (and other people with less influence than they have), and they enforce their ideas socially and legally. Reputation still matters to us. We make mental note of public figures and of businesses with questionable reputations. We gossip about families, often judging them by the behavior of the women and children (for example, who is commonly blamed for an unruly child in the grocery store or for an unkempt house?). Not unlike this author and his community, we also worry about what people think of us, about our “reputation.” Advertising and the self-help industry are insidious aspects of Western culture that promote, or even dictate, social norms for women (and men). They promote anxiety about reputation and social standing, with the hope of converting this anxiety into consumption.

But whose opinion really counts? The Apostle Paul is clear that it is God’s judgment that is most important (1 Corinthians 4:1-7). Although the fictive Paul is anxious about reputation and culturally specific moral behavior, he also commends individuals who cultivate reputable attributes such as steadfastness, integrity, and faithfulness. Such character, rooted in faith and tied into the responsibilities of each stage of the life course, promote behavior pleasing to God and fruitful for the community. Perhaps this view of reputation, whatever our age and gender, is worthwhile in our various roles in family, Church, and society.¹²

NOTES

1 Often called the “Pastoral Epistles,” I prefer to think of the letters to Timothy and Titus as separate, though related, letters.

2 See, for example, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1992).

3 See, for example, Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome: A Life Course Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

4 For excellent explorations of women in early Christianity, see Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), and Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Early Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

5 John W. Marshall, "'I left you in Crete': Narrative Deception and Social Hierarchy in the Letter to Titus," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 127:4 (2008), 781-803.

6 Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris, eds., *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament* (New York: Routledge, 2010), provides a good introduction to cultural values in early Christian communities.

7 Karen Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

8 Virginia Kerns and Judith K. Brown, eds., *In Her Prime: New Views of Middle-Aged Women*, second edition (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

9 "Intercede for" is not the standard translation for the word *paraitou*, but my justification is explained below. My arguments for the interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 given here are presented in full in my doctoral dissertation, *Age Matters: Age, Aging and Intergenerational Relationships in Early Christian Communities, with a Focus on 1 Timothy 5* (University of Toronto, 2011).

10 I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1999), 487.

11 The Greek adjective *pistos* means believing or faithful.

12 I thank Dr. Harold Remus and Susanna Suchak for helpful suggestions for this article.



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