was punished only if he violated the rights of another man by taking a married woman as his accomplice. In the rabbinical age, the school of Shammai permitted a husband to get a divorce only on the grounds of adultery and misconduct. However, some teachers of the more liberal school of Hillel would accept even the most trivial excuse. If the husband charged that his wife had cooked a dish badly, or if he simply preferred another woman, he could repudiate his wife. Even earlier than this it was written in Sirach 25:26: 'If thy wife does not obey thee at a signal and a glance, separate from her.'

Respect for the woman increased once she became a mother, especially if she produced males, since these were, of course, more highly valued. A man could, indeed, sell his daughter as well as his slaves. If a couple did not have children, it was assumed to be the fault of the wife. Briefly, although Hebrew women were honored as parents and often treated with kindness, their social and legal status was that of subordinate beings. It is understandable that Hebrew males prayed: 'I thank thee, Lord, that thou hast not created me a woman.' From the point of view of the modern woman, the situation of women in the ancient Semitic world—and, indeed, in the ancient world in general—has the dimensions of a nightmare.

The contemporary social inferiority of women was, indeed, reflected in the New Testament. Although the seeds of emancipation were present in the Christian message, their full implications were not evident to the first century authors. The most strikingly antifeminist passages are, of course, in the Pauline texts, which are all too familiar to Catholic women, who have heard them cited approvingly ad nauseam. We now know it is important to understand that Paul was greatly preoccupied with order in society and in Christian assemblies in particular. In modern parlance, it seemed necessary to sustain a good 'image' of the Church. Thus it appeared to him an important consideration that women should not have too predominant a place in Christian assemblies, that they should not 'speak' too much or unveil their heads. This would have caused scandal and ridicule of the new sect, which already had to face accusations of immorality and effeminacy. In ancient Corinth, as one scholar has pointed out, for a woman to go out unveiled would be to behave like a prostitute. Paul was concerned with protecting the new Church against scandal. Thus he repeatedly insisted upon 'correct' sexual behavior, including the subjection of wives at meetings. Once this is understood, it becomes evident that it is a perversion to use Pauline texts, which should be interpreted within their own social context, to support the claim that even today, in a totally different society, women should be subject.

Paul looked for theological justification for the prevailing customs, such as the custom that women should wear veils. This partially accounts for his

New Testament

In the New Testament it is significant that the statements which reflect the antifeminism of the times are never those of Christ. There is no recorded speech of Jesus concerning women 'as such.' What is very striking is his behavior toward them. In the passages describing the relationship of Jesus with various women, one characteristic stands out starkly: they emerge as persons, often in such contrast with prevailing custom as to astonish onlookers. The behavior of Jesus toward the Samaritan woman puzzled even his disciples, who were surprised that he would speak to her in public (John 4:27). Then there was his defense of the adulterous woman, who according to the law of Moses should have been stoned (John 8:1–11). There was the case of the prostitute whose many sins he forgave because she had loved much (Luke 7:36–50). In the Gospel narratives the close friendship of Jesus with certain women is manifested in the context of the crucifixion and resurrection. What stands out is the fact that these, his friends, he saw as persons, to whom he gave the supreme yet simple gift of his brotherhood.

Christian authors through the centuries have made much of the Genesis accounts of the creation of Eve and the geographical location of the rib. This, together with her role as temptress in the story of the Fall, supposedly established beyond doubt woman's immutable inferiority, which was not merely physical but also intellectual and moral. So pervasive was this interpretation that through the ages the antifeminist tradition has justified itself on the basis of the origin and activities of the 'first mother' of all mankind. . . .