

## Was a new form of religious participation available to 1<sup>st</sup> century women as a result of Christianity?

### THE CLAIM

'But exemption from time-required laws easily turned to exclusion, so that women became **excluded from active personal participation in study of the Law or active involvement in religious activities in the synagogue** even when time-relatedness was irrelevant.

Women are excused from such devotions as twice-daily recitation of Shema (Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41), use of phylacteries during prayer (mandated by Deut. 6:8), active participation in public worship (especially in leadership roles), and most important of all, in participation in communal study of sacred texts. (Judith Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah*, OUP, 1988)<sup>1</sup>

'It appears that **women at the time of Jesus were restricted** by the legal framework and **were discouraged from religious involvement outside the home.**'<sup>2</sup>

'Jesus is totally and refreshingly free from this kind of approach to women. ...Discipleship on a wider scale **was now open to women**. They could study and learn Christian teaching; they could promote and teach the Good News, though the **conventions of society would still restrict them.**'<sup>3</sup>

### THE FACTS: LATE SOURCES

Ian and Averil attempt to substantiate their claims largely by using quotes from the Mishnah and Talmud.<sup>4</sup> Although recognising that the Talmud was compiled well after the 1<sup>st</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> they still quote from it repeatedly<sup>6</sup> as if its contents were directly relevant to the position of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish women, despite the fact that such a practice has long been criticized by Jewish scholars.<sup>7</sup>

Such quotes are widely recognized as unrepresentative of general 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 24, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Note that the quote they provide from the scholarly work, 'Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah' (Judith Wegner), also describes only the status of women as depicted in the post-1<sup>st</sup> century Mishnah, rather than the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish environment.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Talmud ("Study") comprises the Mishnah with various commentaries upon it **by later rabbis.**', p. 9, '*All One*' (March 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Twenty one times in '*All One*' (March 2009), five times on page 15 alone.

<sup>7</sup> 'Similarly, references to rabbinic customs or sayings as contemporary with Jesus **also reflect a misunderstanding of the development of Judaism**. The Rabbinate emerged as an institution **only after the fall of the Temple in 70 C.E.**, and it took considerable time before rabbinic authority was consolidated and came to represent **more than a minority opinion within the Jewish community.**', Jaskow, 'Blaming Jews for inventing patriarchy', *Lillith*, #11, p. 7 (1980).

attitudes.<sup>8</sup> Ian and Averil **do** tell readers that the rabbinical literature is **not consistently negative** towards women,<sup>9</sup> but the two positive quotes they provide are far outweighed by the long list of negative quotes they have selected.<sup>10</sup> Their overall treatment of historic Jewish attitudes to women is thus little different to that first opposed by Jewish scholars 30 years ago.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 'Ross Shepard Kraemer suggests that 'rabbinic sources may at best refract the social realities of a handful of Jewish communities, and at worst may reflect upon the utopian visions of a relative handful of Jewish men', Jackson, 'Jesus as First-Century Feminist: Christian Anti-Judaism?', *Feminist Theology* (7.91), (1998).

<sup>9</sup> 'On occasions the evidence leads in other directions. Rabbi Hisda is reported to have said, "Daughters are dearer to me than sons" (Baba Bathra 141a). The anonymous Palestinian Jew described as Pseudo-Philo (first century AD) presents a favourable view of women; this is thought so unusual that the suggestion has been made that this anonymous writer is in fact a woman.', pp. 15-16, '*All One*' (March 2009).

<sup>10</sup> 'In summary, though far from being comprehensive and admittedly insufficient to make my case decisively, the purpose of this note is simply to **question the commonly accepted paradigm that women were second-class, unjustly oppressed people in the Rabbinic writings** (and some argue, by implication, the OT) and that now, in the new era of the NT, women are finally accorded justice, that is, the same roles as men. Such a position can be argued, **citing various chauvinistic Rabbinic sources**, but it does not appear that **all the Rabbinic data fit this paradigm**, and it is even more questionable if the OT, as a whole, can be portrayed as anti-women. More work needs to be done on this.', Hove, '*Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute*', p. 105 (1999).

<sup>11</sup> 'Judith Plaskow ('Blaming Jews for Inventing Patriarchy', *Lilith* 7 [1980], p. 11) was one of the first to challenge Swidler and other Christian feminists to **deepen their understanding of Judaism before evaluating 'the uniqueness or nonuniqueness of Jesus'**

<sup>1</sup> '*All One*', p. 14 (March 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

## EVIDENCE OMITTED

Ian and Averil fail to tell readers of evidence for the active religious participation of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish women.<sup>12</sup> More seriously, readers are not told of the evidence for 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish women in leadership positions,<sup>13</sup> contradicting the claim that such positions were only made available to women in the Christian era.<sup>14</sup> Inscriptions ascribing synagogue leadership titles to women<sup>15</sup> (once

---

attitudes towards women'.', Jackson, 'Jesus as First-Century Feminist: Christian Anti-Judaism?', *Feminist Theology* (7.86), (1998).

<sup>12</sup> 'She argues for epigraphical, archaeological and nonrabbinic writings to be placed in the total picture regarding Jewish women in the first century: there is evidence **'that at least some Jewish women played active religious, social, economic, and even political roles in the public lives of Jewish communities.'**', Hove, *'Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute'*, p. 91 (1999).

<sup>13</sup> 'The most compelling evidence comes from Jewish inscriptions from the Hellenistic and Roman diaspora communities. These inscriptions, collected by Brooten and Kraemer,<sup>23</sup> appear both in Greek and Latin and date from the first century b.c.e. to the sixth century c.e. Their provenances reach from Italy to Asia Minor, Palestine and Egypt.<sup>24</sup> These inscriptions give the titles "Mother of the Synagogue" (μήτηρ συνάγωγης, *mater synagogae*) and "elder" (πρεσβύτερα) to women.' Crawford, 'Mothers, Sisters, and Elders: Titles for Women in Second Temple Jewish and Early Christian Communities', *The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity: Papers from an International Conference at St. Andrews in 2001*, p.184 (2003).

<sup>14</sup> 'Bernadette J. Brooten argues that **'the inscriptional evidence for Jewish women leaders** means that one **cannot declare it to be a departure from Judaism** that early Christian women held leadership positions.', Hove, *'Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute'*, p. 92 (1999).

<sup>15</sup> **'Other women more clearly singled out for their**

disputed,<sup>16</sup> now accepted<sup>17</sup>), prove 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish women were active religious participants in private and public,<sup>18</sup> contradicting Ian and Averil's claim that public religious roles for Christian women were restricted local attitudes.<sup>19</sup> Some 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish women were even religious leaders,<sup>20</sup>

---

**roles as leaders in the synagogues**, include Sara Oura, called *presbutis*, or elder; Beturia Paulla, called mother of the synagogues of Camus and Voluminius, Marcella, mother of the synagogue of the Augustesians; and Simplicia, mother of an unidentified synagogue, whose husband was also called father of the synagogue.

**Gaudentia is called *hierisa*, the feminine equivalent of the Greek word for priest.**', Kraemer, 'Jewish Women in Rome and Egypt', in Juschka, *'Feminism in the study of religion: a reader'*, p. 227 (2001).

<sup>16</sup> 'Until very recently, scholars routinely assumed that women could not have held functional leadership roles in Roman synagogues, and viewed these inscriptions as purely honorific, or, in the case of Gaudentia, evidence for priestly family ties.', *ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>17</sup> 'Recently, however, Bernadette J. Brooten has convincingly demonstrated that these titles and inscriptions **almost certainly testify to women leaders in ancient Roman synagogues**. Even stronger evidence exists for **women leaders in synagogues** in other Jewish communities in the Greco-Roman world.' *ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>18</sup> 'From these inscriptions, and the adjectives praising their piety and devotion to the law, we see that Jewish women in Rome **were active participants in the religious life of their communities, both at home and in the public religious life of the synagogue.**' *ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>19</sup> **'the conventions of society** would still restrict them', *'All One'*, p. 25 (March 2009).

<sup>20</sup> 'As Brooten has argued, there is no reason to assume that these titles do not reflect **a leadership role for the women so designated**.<sup>25</sup> Brooten lists seven Greek inscriptions that contain the epithet πρεσβύτερα, and Kraemer adds one more.<sup>26</sup> The women called πρεσβύτερα **appear to have been members of a synagogue council of elders**.<sup>27</sup>', Crawford, 'Mothers, Sisters, and Elders: Titles for Women in Second Temple Jewish and Early Christian Communities', *The Dead Sea*

proving this was not a role unavailable to 1<sup>st</sup> century Christian women.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, 1<sup>st</sup> century Greco-Roman society contained a wide range of attitudes towards women, from the misogynist to the egalitarian.<sup>22</sup> Paul would thus have been aware of how his commandments sounded to some.<sup>23</sup>

(Jonathan Burke, 2010)

---

*Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity: Papers from an International Conference at St. Andrews in 2001*, p.184 (2003).

<sup>21</sup> However, there is no evidence that 1<sup>st</sup> century Christian women actually held such positions, despite their availability; Crawford says 'early Christian communities produce evidence for the use of the epithets πρεσβύτερα, 'αδελφή [sic] and **possibly** μήτηρ as titles for women in positions of leadership and authority in the early Christian community', *ibid.*, p. 187 (emphasis added), but provides no definite evidence for *adelphē* ('These wives **may** have participated in various leadership roles in the communities they visited, **but Paul does not say this**', p.187, emphasis added), describes the case for *mētēr* as merely 'possible' (p.189), and the earliest evidence she provides for *presbutera* is from the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century (p.190).

<sup>22</sup> **'But studies of Roman society have found a variety of indicators about the status of women, and what was true about women in the eastern part of the empire was not necessarily true about women in the western empire.** On the one hand, there was the household headed by the husband/father/master, a hierarchical order-obedience structure that included those who were economically dependent. On the other hand, there were emancipatory ideas about women that allowed them greater freedom and economic independence (some were even the heads of households).', Tanzer (egalitarian), 'Eph 5:22-33 Wives (and Husbands) Exhorted', in Meyers, Craven, & Kraemer, 'Women in scripture: a dictionary of named and unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament', p. 481 (2001).

<sup>23</sup> **'In other contexts, among some gentiles**, Paul's moral conservatism and reaffirmation of traditional roles for women **would have appeared too confining** (this appears to have been the case in Corinth).', Witherington (egalitarian), 'Women', Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, volume 6, p. 959 (1996).