

What were Jewish attitudes to women in the 1st century?

THE CAUTION

Ian and Averil rightly note the importance of treating fairly the contrast between Jewish and Christian attitudes to women:

‘Katharina von Kellenbach, for example, in *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, (Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1994) objects to the way she considers Judaism has been blackened in order to show Christianity by contrast to be better in its treatment of women. **We have tried to avoid this pitfall.**’¹

However, Ian and Averil have quoted almost exclusively from Jewish sources written **after** the 1st century.² Although citing the Apocrypha as another possible source,³ they do not quote any 1st century apocryphal works. Nor do they refer to the 1st century records of two significantly egalitarian Jewish religious communities, the Essenes⁴ and Therapeutae⁵.

¹ ‘All One’, p. 9 (March 2009).

² The historian Josephus, the philosopher Philo of Alexandria, and the unidentified writer ‘pseudo-Philo’ (a source comprising writings falsely attributed to Philo), are the only 1st century Jewish sources they quote.

³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴ ‘the Essenes and the Therapeutai show evidence of influence by Hellenistic utopian thinking (**including the egalitarian aspects of such thought**)’, ‘**egalitarian features** of actual ancient Jewish utopian movements

THE CLAIMS AND THE FACTS

- ‘Thus, in the thinking of many who produced the Mishnah, **women were generally denied the opportunities open to men to develop spiritual understanding and stimulus**, to appreciate for themselves the meaning of God’s will and revelation, and to teach and encourage others apart from their own children.’⁶

Ian and Averil acknowledge that the Mishnah⁷ is a 2nd century source, but despite claiming it contains some 1st century material⁸ they do not provide any evidence that they have quoted only this material. Unless they do, these quotes are not reliable evidence for the position of women in the 1st century any more than quotes from the Talmud.⁹

(**Essenes** or Therapeutai). Beavis, ‘Christian Origins, Egalitarianism, and Utopia’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (23.2), pp. 46, 48 (2007).

⁵ ‘No barriers can be placed around the women Therapeutae that would exclude them from any functions in the community.’, Taylor, ‘The Women “Priests” of Philo’s *De Vita Contemplativa*; Reconstructing the Therapeutae’, in *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, p.118 (2003).

⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

⁷ Quoted repeatedly in ‘*All One*’ (March 2009), pp. 10 (five times), 11 (once), 12 (once), 13 (once), 14 (three times), 20 (twice), 23 (once).

⁸ ‘The Mishnah (“Oral Teaching”) is a book of rules **compiled in Palestine in the second century AD** but using material **going back at least to the time of Jesus**’, *ibid.*, p.9.

⁹ ‘First of all, a number of discussions of Jewish attitudes towards women **use the Talmud or passages from it to**

- ‘Rabbi Juda ben Elai (**150 AD, but echoing statements made earlier**) said:

There are three Benedictions which one must say every day: “Blessed be He who did not make me a Gentile”; “Blessed be He who did not make me a woman”; “Blessed be He who did not make me an uneducated man.”

(Tosephta “Additions”: Tractate Berakoth “Benedictions” vii, 18)’¹⁰

This is a quote from **2nd century** rabbi without any evidence that this is relevant to the **1st century**.¹¹ Ian and Averil do not identify which ‘statements made earlier’¹² are being echoed by this quote or how much earlier they were made, so these unidentified statements are irrelevant to the task of determining the position of women in 1st

establish the role of Jewish women in Jesus’ time. The Talmud however, is a compilation of Jewish law and argument which was not given final form **until the sixth century**. Passages in it may be much older or at least reflect reworkings of earlier material. **But this can be determined only on the basis of painstaking scholarly sifting of individual texts.**’, Jaskow, ‘Blaming Jews for inventing patriarchy’, *Lillith*, #11, p. 7 (1980).

¹⁰ ‘All One’, p. 15 (March 2009).

¹¹ ‘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).

¹² ‘All One’, p. 15 (March 2009).

century Judaism. The claim that this quote is ‘echoing statements made earlier’,¹³ may mislead readers into thinking that this quote is representative of how women were viewed in 1st century Judaism.

- ‘Paul, when a traditional Jew, **once prayed thanking God for not making him a Gentile, a slave or a woman.**’¹⁴

There is no evidence whatever that Paul or any other 1st century Jew ever prayed this.¹⁵

OTHER RABBINICAL COMMENT

Ian and Averil **do** tell readers that the rabbinical literature is **not consistently negative** towards women,¹⁶ but the two positive quotes they provide are far outweighed by the long list of negative

¹³ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁵ ‘First, the earliest dating on a source for this prayer is **the mid-second century** (attributed to Rabbi Judah Ben Elai)—**about one hundred years after Paul writes this letter.**’⁴⁹ Thus, as Cottrell says, “**it is pure speculation**” to think that this was a Jewish prayer that Paul would have grown up praying.⁵⁰ Schemm, ‘Galatians 3:28 — Proof-text or Context?’, *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (8.1.27), (2003); the author is a complementarian, but the facts to which he refers are a matter of historical record.

¹⁶ ‘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).

quotes they have selected. If they feel that the rabbinical commentary of the centuries after Christ is relevant, they should quote it fairly and at length, in accordance with scholarly concerns over the use of such sources,^{17 18} and according to approved academic standards of practice.

- ‘The compassion of men extends to men more than women, but not thus is the compassion of God; **His compassion extends equally to men and women and to all**’¹⁹

¹⁷ ‘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).

¹⁸ ‘Yet writers dealing with Jewish attitudes towards women **often select only the most negative rabbinic passages on the topic**. Their treatment of Judaism is analogous to **conservative Christian arguments for the subordination of women** which quote only certain verses from Paul.’, Plaskow, ‘Blaming Jews for inventing patriarchy’, *Lillith*, #11, p. 7 (1980).

¹⁹ “‘When the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. xxvii, 1-12) heard that the land was being divide among men to the exclusion of women, they assembled together to take counsel. They said: ‘The compassion of God is not as the compassion of men. **The compassion of men**

- ‘God does not act thus: **all are equal before Him, women, slaves, rich and poor**’”²⁰
- ‘**Whether it be Israelite or Gentile, man or woman, slave or handmaid**, whoever does a good deed, shall find the reward at its side’²¹

These passages all postdate the 1st century and should not be considered necessarily representative of 1st century attitudes, but they do help provide a more balanced view of the relevant Jewish literature.

(Jonathan Burke, 2010)

extends to men more than women, but not thus is the compassion of God; His compassion extends equally to men and women and to all, even as it is said, “The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all his works”” (italics mine). Sifre Numbers, Pinehas, §133, f. 49a, quoted in Montefiore and Loewe, *Rabbinic Anthology*, 510.’, Hove, ‘*Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute*’, p. 104 (1999).

²⁰ “‘If a poor man comes, and pleads before another, that other does not listen to him; if a rich man comes, he listens to, and receives, him at once: **God does not act thus: all are equal before Him, women, slaves, rich and poor**” (italics mine). R. Judah b. Shalom [fourth century A.D.] quoted in Exodus Rabbah 21.4, quoted in Montefiore and Loewe, *Rabbinic Anthology*, 346.’, *ibid.*, p. 104.

²¹ ‘4. This passage is remarkably similar to Galatians 3:28: “God says to Moses, ‘Is there respect of persons with me? **Whether it be Israelite or Gentile, man or woman, slave or handmaid, whoever does a good deed, shall find the reward at its side**, as it says, ‘Thy righteousness is like the everlasting hills: man and beast alike thou savest, O Lord”” (italics mine). Yalkut, Lek leka, §76, quoted in Montefiore and Loewe, *Rabbinic Anthology*, 380.’, *ibid.*, p. 104.