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Women in Early Judaism: Twenty-five Years of Research and Reenvisioning

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ABSTRACT

Studies of women in Early Judaism seek to correct and go beyond earlier examinations that had overlooked women. In this they share some important goals with social history, arguing that histories that ignore all but the most prominent individuals offer a distorted presentation of the ancient world. Involving an initial reinvisioning, such explorations partake of the varied methodologies and methodological challenges of other projects in Religious Studies and Jewish Studies. Following the pioneering scholars who first challenged assumptions that only men had merited attention, and their successors who gathered evidence concerning Jewish women, current researchers struggle with post-structuralist questions concerning how much one may read texts as social reality. Responses to these challenges continue to build upon the work of recent decades even as they begin to investigate new possibilities.

Keywords: Early Judaism, gender, post-structuralist, rabbinic, Roman world, social history, women.

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago Brooten authored *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (1982), a book that in many ways demonstrates the prior myopic state of research concerning women and the many unexplored questions relating to the lives of women in Early Judaism. In that study, Brooten offers a conclusion diametrically opposed to the reigning consensus. Whereas

earlier scholars had been convinced that all leaders of ancient synagogues were men, Brooten reexamines published inscriptions and argues that synagogue dedications referring to a woman as 'head/president', 'leader' or 'elder' actually referred to women assuming these roles. She challenges earlier research that had relied on the rather more burdensome presumption that these titles were honorific only, while these dedicatory stones alluded to the unnamed husbands of the women named. Thus, Brooten uncovers convoluted assumptions, and with this elegant perspectival change she, and others like her, reveal that women are hidden within known material, waiting to be studied.

As Brooten's study illustrated, earlier scholars had overlooked questions concerning the nature of women's lives that now needed to be asked. By explicitly naming the political resistance on the part of those that preceded her, Brooten presented the evidence as already there and merely obscured. Concerning a third century CE inscription that describes the wealthy and well-connected 'Rufina, a Jewess, head of the synagogue', Brooten emphasizes the historiographical context, describing how 'Jean-Baptiste Frey… notes, "It seems difficult to admit that she actually exercised the functions of a head of the synagogue"' (1982: 6). Brooten writes that 'It does seem difficult for these scholars to admit that a woman could have exercised an official function in the ancient synagogue' (1982: 7), thereby revealing the failure of earlier scholars to understand the world outside their own political expectations. Thus, she unearthed gaps in previous scholarship, and named the discrimination that had kept these gaps unexamined. Nevertheless, 'feminism' remained a loaded term. On the one hand, Brooten succeeded in exploring the unannounced biases of prior, so-called 'neutral', scholarship. On the other hand, scholars generally distrusted studies that had an apparent political agenda.

In this particular instance of women and leadership roles, debate raged within the twentieth-century Jewish community, even as parallel debates consumed Christian denominations, as to whether women could lead synagogues and churches, particularly as rabbis and ministers. In the early 1980s, the Conservative Movement of Judaism joined Reform and Reconstructionist Jews in ordaining women as rabbis (Wenger 1997). Such discussions not only assume things about the nature of these leadership positions, but also expose disagreements over essential qualities of women that would make assuming leadership roles inevitable or impossible. Even as they remain unarticulated, Brooten revealed these same assumptions at work in contemporary scholarship. Since then, Brooten's explorations of women synagogue leaders, especially in Asia Minor, have been supported

in a number of ways including contemporaneous evidence for Christian and 'Pagan' women leaders in Asia Minor (Kearsley 1986; Freisen 1993; van Bremen 1996). Nevertheless, her challenge to earlier studies began with a careful look at the various titles in a number of inscriptions and by not assuming the importance of husbands who were not mentioned. Feminist scholars pursued traces of women even when such scholarship was not popular because they recognized something about the world that had been and could not be ignored. For them good scholarship demanded such a transformation.

There are many different 'feminisms' and even more women and men writing about women. In studying history, some feminist approaches have sought to find the voices of women: literary voices, musical voices and artistic voices. Some have tried to create a new place for women where one did not before exist. And some have not named their approaches 'feminist', merely understanding themselves as scholars able to contribute to the search and discovery of the past. Meanwhile, many feminists gravitate to social history (and perhaps social historians also gravitate to feminist agendas) in order to ask: where are the women? Who were they? How did they live? Social history redirects attention to smaller happenings, challenging that we cannot understand the world if we only consider great events, literary centerpieces and elite individuals. While women have appeared only sporadically in ancient sources, and in modern presentations of these earlier eras, nonetheless, we know they were there. What other clues besides synagogue inscriptions have we missed? In some ways social history serves as the perfect approach for investigating these silences, for it drives research into communal activities, social developments and everyday actions.

Below I deal with the methodological challenges of looking for women who are often not named and perhaps not even mentioned. Despite these difficulties, however, the questions themselves have already transformed the fields of Religious Studies and Jewish Studies. Even in the absence of clear conclusions, questions about earlier women change the way we look at the ancient world. Such questions recall the rudiments of demography (namely that a large percentage of the population is female); they challenge the acceptability of studies that ignore these basic truths, and they teach us to revisit 'received wisdom' when it conflicts with what we know to be the case. In short, this area of research transforms every history we will ever read, whether it explicitly mentions women or not. To ask after the current trends in research on women in Early Judaism is first and foremost to take note of a quiet revolution, certainly an incomplete revolution, but one that nonetheless must gradually change our understanding of the ancient world.

This article focuses on research into women in Early Judaism, the importance of this research and the stages that it has gone through in not much more than two decades. First were the pioneers, such as Brooten, who named the oversight of women's history and the need to revisit available sources. Following that, scholars proceeded with the task of recovering evidence for the actual lives of ancient women. For several years one observes the twin goals of reaching beyond former barriers and recovering 'lost' women. Nevertheless, the journey does not end there.

The most recent step in this research trajectory began as the study of women in Early Judaism met the insights, challenges and sensitivities of postmodern scholarship. Late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century scholars recognized that some of the portrayals of 'women' that one found in ancient texts had to be understood, at least in part, as 'constructions' of women. Recent scholarship found that presentations of 'women' or femininity might tell us as much or more about men (or possibly 'men'), masculinity and a variety of other political concerns as anything tangible regarding the lives of women. Twenty-five years after Brooten, current research on women and Early Judaism now strives to build upon the 'recovered' histories of women pursued in the 1980s and 1990s, while at the same time recognizing the doubling of its goal: the need to examine both women and constructed aspects of 'women'.

As many twenty-first-century researchers have come to recognize that not all women in historical sources represent real women, some scholars have feared that a focus on constructions of gender might once again remove those newly discovered women figures that were formerly invisible in historical texts, and certainly this haunts some recent research. Nevertheless, a focus on gender also provides new possibilities for how to analyze texts. The broadening of Women's Studies to include Gender Studies allows for the exploration of constructions of gender as a central category of history, shaping understandings of femininity, masculinity, and eventually also lesbians, gay men, bisexual and trangendered individuals. Current research into all these implications of gender and Judaism deserves its own study; meanwhile this article traces how these insights into gender contribute to research on women. In fact, there is a certain compatibility between postmodern insights and feminist revisiting. Each seeks to undo arbitrary, hegemonic assumptions. In fact, postmodern ideas question the possibility of an objective perspective. Earlier I discussed scholarly ambivalence towards texts with a political agenda, explaining that Brooten succeeded because she demonstrated that the biased vision preceded her and she merely sought to correct it. By contrast, in the twenty-first century one finds a larger

portion of the scholarly community recognizing the *impossibility* of objectivity in texts, in fact insisting upon some sort of acknowledgement of the relevant power dynamics. New postmodern insights will challenge certain methodological assumptions of earlier feminist scholarship; nevertheless they do not disrupt the basic idea that good history must look at the entire population, and in fact they contribute new ideas concerning hierarchy and textual constructions of power that can ultimately serve such pursuits.

In this article I will look at the questions and methods that propel the study of women in Early Judaism. After exploring the meaning of important terms (section 1), I consider three roughly drawn phases of recent scholarship: the initial challenges to histories told without women (sections 2 and 3); the collecting and recovery of missing evidence for women (section 4); and the newest considerations of Jewish women in light of postmodern ideas of constructedness that give every indication of shaping the field for the foreseeable future (sections 5 and 6). Meanwhile, as postmodern insights cause scholars to revise earlier studies, including studies that concern women, we can observe that they add to, rather than displace, the transforming insights of Brooten. Whatever else new studies accomplish they continue to recognize the need to see beyond the narrow vision that had overlooked evidence for women in the ancient world.

1. *Defining Terms and Considering their Significance*

a. *Early Judaism*

Before proceeding, I will first offer a word about Early Judaism and about 'women' in the title of this article. I use 'Early Judaism' to describe the Judaisms from the Hellenistic period in the fourth century BCE to the Islamic conquest in the seventh century CE because I understand this term to best characterize the variety of religious and cultural worlds explored here (Kraft and Nickelsburg 1986: 1-2; Jaffee 1997: 15-20). It is a term very like Ancient Judaism, as used by the editors of this journal. There is no single term used by all the authors surveyed, and not all consider the entire period, with some looking at Hellenistic Judaism, some at Jews in the Roman world, and some at rabbinic communities in the third century CE and following. Moreover, I have tried to include some references to all parts of this period, but there is more focus on the latter centuries.

Although the term 'post-biblical' can be very useful for bibliographic searches, not all the studies considered conceive of themselves as textually based, or reference biblical materials. I have also avoided the term 'Greco-Roman' in light of concerns voiced by Peskowitz that eliding the

two terms tends to 'efface the differences within' (1997b: 14). She reminds her readers that one must attend to constructed relationships, such as those 'with the bureaucracy of Rome and with the idea of Rome'. Studies since then have more than demonstrated the Roman impact on the identity of its Jewish subjects (see for instance Lapin 2001a). In addition, because I focus on this period only, I do not include more overarching treatments of women and Jewish law or halacha. For instance, Biale (1984) offers an early study, referenced by many scholars of Early Judaism. Her study, and those like it, treat sources for later practice and consider Early Judaism as one stage in the creation of laws that continue to affect women. These can appear as collections of various laws pertaining to women, or as research into specific laws, such as those relating to abortion or divorce. Nevertheless, in order to consider the variety of explorations of Early Judaism itself, an examination of studies that culminate in modern halachic questions is beyond the scope of this article.

b. *'Women' rather than 'Gender'*

As I indicate above, this study focuses on 'women' despite the recognition that 'gender' is the more inclusive category, and that 'women' in ancient texts can serve as constructs that say very little about historical women. There are three important reasons for this focus. First, while this study presents the transformational aspects of twenty-five years of studies concerning women in Early Judaism, it does not present a utopian vision of what the history of Early Judaism ought to look like. Rather it tracks the successes, the limits and the breakthroughs of approaches to the study of women. Peskowitz and her insights into the cultural construction of identity figure importantly in this history (see section 5 below). She shifts the dialogue towards the underlying ideas of gender, highlighting all that can be overlooked when one interprets rabbinic references to women as referring directly to historical figures. Peskowitz urges that historical investigations should move from questions of 'what', towards '*how* did the kinds of genders and sexualities articulated in the Jewish texts of the Roman period become possible?' (1997a: 20). Nevertheless, Peskowitz's colleagues did not all share her reliance upon new theoretical underpinnings. Peskowitz cautions against the 'always-present minefield of addition', explaining that she 'wanted to avoid the model that teaches "Judaism" and then, as an additional gesture, speaks to "women" in Judaism' (1997a: 30). Meanwhile, others still had reasons to ask these questions. Baskin responds to Peskowitz that it is still important to look at 'what'. Baskin explains that in the texts she studies 'rabbinic literature expresses a diversity of attitudes about

women', and 'androcentrism is an inherent feature of the classical texts of rabbinic Judaism' (1997: 125-26; see also Hauptman 1998: 6, 13 n. 13). Thus, this article traces many who, while indebted to Peskowitz's vision, nonetheless continue to add women to histories from which they had been too long absent. In an ideal world, the recognitions of gender put forth by Peskowitz would make this unnecessary, but until that time evidence for women helps with the larger project of transforming assumptions about the ancient world. Moreover, this focus recognizes that insight into the lives of 'real' social historical women was the goal of many earlier studies, and since it has not been achieved it still drives many current studies. Ultimately, knowing that sources are more likely to yield certain 'constructions of gender' rather than access to 'real' women themselves has not done away with the need to remind ourselves and others that women lived with and among these various constructions of 'men' as well as 'women', and that we need not settle for their invisibility.

c. *Identifying Women*

This brings us to the second reason for studying 'women'—it provides an important viewpoint from which to observe discussions about method. As the dialogue between Peskowitz and Baskin above suggests, even when parties disagree, the focus on how best to study women in the ancient world leads to an important refining of and sharing of goals. Before examining these methods as they concern Jewish women, and in the interest of such refining, two discussions of how best to study women in Christian literature clearly articulate the fears and hopes of scholars in a related field.

Clark spent many year 'recovering' early women from obscurity in Patristic texts (1983 and 1986). As she embraces new theoretical approaches, she has revisited her earlier ideas of what we can know about women. And in addition, she offers a survey of the post-structural thinkers relevant to the work of historians. She particularly responds to 'many American feminist historians' who feared studying constructions of gender, who desired to study only historical individuals, and who had raised the concern that 'if "agency" is discarded, the historian's interest in change and causality is undercut' (Clark 1998: 5). Clark notes that these concerns unfortunately have led many scholars to reject 'post structuralist theory'. She cautions against reacting to these fears with an oversimplified appeal to women's 'experience'. Clark refers to the work of Scott, who has questioned 'experience' as a viable category because 'historians must start with the processes of signification that stand prior to "meaning" and "experience"' (Clark 1998: 8-9; concerning Scott 1991). Clark's pursuit of 'the processes of significa-

tion' covers decades of post-structuralist works, but Foucault is particularly important to the present article because understandings of 'constructedness' owe much to his focus on denaturalizing and re-historicizing objects that appear natural (Clark 2004: 116-17, 176). For Clark such insights help to challenge the apparently 'natural' association of nature and women in patristic literature, and thus to reveal presentations of 'women' as constructions that serve a narrative purpose (2004: 177-78). The new histories, or, as Foucault calls them, 'genealogies', trace ideology and power within such narratives (Foucault 1977). In this light women's history seeks to reveal the webs of power that has shaped the lives of women and men instead of the 'recovery' of those women mentioned by the text itself. While Clark's conclusions here are not so different from Peskowitz's, she explicitly challenges those shy of theory to directly engage the theoreticians themselves.

Matthews takes a different approach. She begins by rehistoricizing the modern discussion of using women 'to think with'. Four decades ago Lévi-Strauss famously proclaimed that women were '*circulated* between clans…in place of the *words of the group*' (1963: 61, his emphasis). Brown then invoked this idea to suggest that the central roles played by women in the Christian non-canonical Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles need not be taken 'as evidence for the actual role of women' since 'males of that period partook in the deeply ingrained tendency of all men in the ancient world, to use women "to think with"' (1988: 153). Cooper later develops and expands these ideas (1996). Meanwhile, several scholars of women and Christian Origins had become particularly intrigued by the strong women characters, like Thecla, that appear in the Apocryphal Acts. In her response to this debate, Matthews steers between the 'all' or 'nothing' poles. She reminds her readers that Lévi-Strauss took care to clarify how this 'thinking with' worked:

> …one should keep in mind that the processes by which phonemes and words have been reduced to pure signs, will never lead to the same results in matters concerning women. For words do not speak, while women do: as producers for signs, women can never be reduced to the status of symbols or tokens (Matthews 2001: 51, citing Lévi-Strauss 1963: 61).

To the interpreter of texts, a 'woman' could be nothing but a construction, but Lévi-Strauss reminds his readers that the 'speaking' woman complicated glib conclusions. Therefore, Matthews insists upon consideration of the flesh and blood women who lived alongside the literary constructions. With this step, Matthews refocuses the question as that of the text, as well as the world beyond. She cites texts by male church leaders who objected to early Christian women justifying their actions through appeals to the

Apocryphal Acts. Thus Matthews describes responses to the Apocryphal Acts, arguing that 'in the second and early third centuries, women…pointed to the example of Thecla to authorize their public speech'. Matthews concludes that 'not only is the Thecla text about "authority and social order" as Cooper recognizes, but also, at least in its reception history, it had quite a lot to do with women' (2001: 53). Thecla's text may not clearly point to an historical 'Thecla' within its pages, but it does reveal traces of women who later knew and referenced this story. By taking both sides of the debate into consideration, Matthews opens up the complexity of moving from text to an understanding of social reality. Like Clark, Matthews makes explicit her response to the question on how to navigate between the search for women and the recognition of constructed 'women'. We will see strategies akin to those of Clark and Matthews in some of the works discussed below.

d. *Identities as Jewish Women*

The third and final reason to consider 'women' recognizes that even as the study of early Jewish sources can learn from explorations of women in other disciplines, so too the unique perspectives of those who study Jewish women can also contribute to the larger dialogues concerning women in the ancient world. The first scholarly projects on ancient Jewish women emerged in the midst of the birth of a national and international feminist movement, alongside other projects in other disciplines that shared similar goals. Many of the authors below cite de Beauvoir (1953) and other early feminists as forces behind their work, even as they challenge aspects of such early theories (see for instance Wegner 1988: 192-93; Fonrobert 2000: 6, 42). Meanwhile, historians of Jewish women also came to recognize that not all feminist work provided ways to think about Judaism or Jewish women. For one thing, some feminist histories blamed Jews for 'patriarchy', and were otherwise anti-Semitic in their assumptions (Plaskow 1980; Kellenbach 1994). Even as earlier historical explorations of women could be androcentric and anti-feminist, so too explorations of Jews could be anti-Jewish. Thus, some of the scholars surveyed below appeal to the theoretical work of feminists who have explicitly considered Jewish concerns (see Ilan [1995: 2-21] for a good overall presentation of the history of this period of research). In addition, following this need to recognize identities as Jews and as women, some recent research, in the spirit of postmodernism and authorial self-scrutiny, reflects on the complex tensions between feminism and religious identity and/or Jewish nationalism (Alexander 2000: 102-103, 108-109; Fonrobert 2000: 5-6; Baker 2002: 7-14, 23, 141). One finds exciting insights emerging from the recognition of these compet-

ing constructions of identity. For all these reasons the survey below focuses on 'women': as a corrective to studies that overlooked women, in order to explore concerns about how to study women, and as an opportunity to examine overlapping identities.

2. *Revisiting Inscriptions and Greek Sources Concerning Early Judaism*

Brooten did not act alone in her pioneering challenges to assumptions that concealed evidence of women. Rather, she joined with others who also envisioned a different history. R.S. Kraemer published a series of articles concerning Jewish women in epigraphic and literary sources (Kraemer 1980, 1987 and 1989). She followed these pieces with a source book collecting texts and inscriptions attesting to Jewish (and Christian and 'Pagan') women (1988), and then she authored a synthetic discussion of early women in light of this evidence (1992). One of Kraemer's initial explorations concerns Philo's *On the Contemplative Life* (1989; see also 1992: 113-17), a text that had been long available, but one that had not been used as evidence to portray the lives of early Jewish women. Kraemer examines Philo's rich description of the Therapeutrides, the monastic Jewish women who, like their male counterparts, retreated to the Mareotic Lake to explore allegorical interpretations of Jewish scriptures. Kraemer emphasizes the details in this portrait of these unusual Jewish women. She notes that 'although it was hardly Philo's intention to describe the former lives of those who joined the society, he did in fact provide some of this information' (1989: 349). She particularly examines the evidence that adults were already highly educated before arriving at the community. Kraemer considers that:

> While it is unlikely that very many women, Jewish or otherwise, would have been so highly educated, the evidence from papyri, inscriptions, and literature suggests that at least some women in Alexandria and in other communities with substantial Jewish populations in this period were well educated (1989: 349-50).

In addition she emphasizes the differences between men and women in Philo's discussion: 'When [Philo] lists those whom philosophers abandon to take up the contemplative life, husbands are conspicuous by their absence' (1989: 351). Kraemer explains that this implies that these women were now widowed or had never married. Although we will see below that Kraemer revisits her earlier conclusions in light of new ideas about constructions of gender, at this early date she states 'this description is, I believe, rooted in social reality' (1992: 114). Over and over, in

her various projects, Kraemer has unearthed evidence for Jewish women that had been invisible in plain view.

3. *Revisiting Rabbinic Sources Concerning Early Judaism*

As Brooten and Kraemer revisited inscriptions and texts concerning Jews from many different communities around the Mediterranean and else-where, Wegner (1988) considered evidence for women drawn from the Mishnah. Once again we find a text in plain view, but much of what it says concerning the lives of women had remained unexamined. Wegner's work builds upon that of Neusner (1979 and 1980), who presented the Mishnah as describing women as a dangerous anomaly that needed to be constrained. Wegner observes that the Mishnah sometimes understood the lives of women as chattel, and sometimes as person, concluding that: 'To the Mishnah's framers, then, woman presents an anomaly, a "legal hybrid" that defies logical classification' (1988: 8). Chapter by chapter she looks at how the Mishnah has characterized women in various circumstances: minor daughter, wife, levirate widow, emancipated daughter, divorcee, and widow. Wegner writes self-consciously, establishing a fine foundation for others interested in studying women in rabbinic literature. She situates her conclusions within the major feminist and Jewish feminist thinking of her time (1988: 182-98, citing de Beauvoir 1953; Ozick 1979; Greenberg 1981; Umansky 1982; Plaskow 1983; Schüssler-Fiorenza 1983; Biale 1984). Moreover, she reflects upon her method, recognizing that she has examined 'status', the utopian and legal frameworks surrounding women within the rabbinic corpus, rather than necessarily treating the particular lives of women (1988: 144). While those who followed Wegner of course offered refinements (Hauptman 1992; King 1992), nevertheless, her contributions remain trenchant. For instance she both considers and critiques the inapplicability of the binary opposition between domestic and public, observing that 'a contract of sale, though not domestic, is not a public activity' (1988: 189, discussing Baskin 1985, discussing Rosaldo 1974). Thus Wegner not only opens up rabbinic texts to the search for evidence concerning women, but she also anticipates later criticism of the usefulness of broad categories and binaries in understanding the lives of women (Baker 2002: 18-22).

4. *Collecting and Interpreting*

In the 1990s the initial 'unveiling' of historical women gave way to the collecting and interpreting of new evidence and ideas. As in the pioneer-

ing studies, one finds no single academic 'home' for the study of Jewish women in Early Judaism. Instead one observes various explorations in the fields of Religious Studies and Jewish Studies, incorporating the methods of those disciplines.

a. *Religious Women in the Ancient World*

Following Brooten and Kraemer, one approach to considering the lives of Jewish women continues to situate Jewish women with their Christian and 'Pagan' counterparts. In particular, such studies look for common threads in women's involvement in religious life. In addition to those works already mentioned, Levine edited a volume of essays that addresses 'the literary images and social situations of Jewish women, as well as their Gentile and Christian counterparts' (A.-J. Levine 1991: xi). Later, one finds other anthologies and encyclopedic treatments (Kraemer and D'Angelo 1999; Meyers 2000). The majority of studies focus on one aspect or another of Jewish women's religious lives in light of the lives of other women and other cultures, such as articles in Levine's collection, and a few miscellaneous others (Corley 1989; Elder 1994; Richardson 1996; Lieu 1998; and see section 4d below). In addition, those pursuing comparative questions can also refer to volumes beyond the scope of this study that examine the lives of Christian, Greek or Roman women.

b. *Women in Jewish History*

Another approach to the study of Jewish women focuses on Jewish history. Baskin, whose early article (1985) had offered methodological explorations, including that of domestic and public that Wegner wrestled with, compiles a collection of essays examining the impact of gender on the lives of women and men cross-temporally rather than cross-culturally (Baskin 1991). The late 1970s and early 1980s had seen important collections concerning women and Judaism (Koltun 1976; Heschel 1983), but these had a theoretical/theological focus rather than an historical one. Baskin's collection covers a great deal more than two thousand years, only some parts of which concern this study, but it succeeds in breaking ground. While there followed a small number of other such collections (Grossman and Haut 1992), these collections underscore the need for more studies on women and gender, and the work continues in projects focusing on individual historical periods.

Ilan recognizes and takes up the challenge. Her book-length treatment of Jewish women in the Greco-Roman world addresses women, history and the mechanics of a history of one place and time (1995). She limits herself

to Palestine, and builds upon the sources, observations and questions of Brooten, Kraemer, Wegner, as well as of scholars who have attended to specific issues that impact the lives of women, like Jewish marriage (Epstein 1942). She quite explicitly narrows the scope of her project: 'It is incumbent on the historian to choose a…chronological framework which is not dictated by the sources' (1995: 24). In focusing on Palestine she can develop questions of the status of women in rabbinic material, as well as juxtapose the analysis of these sources with evidence from the Apocrypha, Josephus, lost sources of Josephus, New Testament, inscriptions and Dead Sea Scrolls as well as papyri and ostraca from the Judaean desert whose importance had become more and more apparent as the twentieth century waned (1995: 27-43). Her work of course also depends on recent histories of a more narrow scope, such as those concerning the life of Babatha (Cotton 1993; and later Cotton 2002). Ilan's focus on only Hellenistic and Roman Palestine allows her great depth in her exploration. But the number of sources Ilan commands creates inevitable difficulties in how she evaluates them. Where Wegner's focus had been on rabbinic literature as frame or utopia, Ilan frequently seeks to use her findings as evidence for social reality, in order to offer, for instance, 'a glimpse into the world of the lower classes in Jewish society of the period' (1995: 83). In the following decade scholars of rabbinic literature would heatedly debate this question of whether and how one may read these sources for evidence of social reality (Schwartz 2001).

Meanwhile, for those studying women, the question of how positively or how skeptically to read one's sources had become particularly vexed. Evidence for women had been ignored so much in the past that the cost of a skeptical attitude towards recently recovered women seemed particularly high. Although Ilan acknowledges a need for skepticism, she remains more a positivist than a skeptic even in her later work. Nevertheless, in her latest book she proceeds more carefully in offering 'reconstructions'. In addition she also explicitly acknowledges her choices and explains the importance of mapping these hitherto ignored connections when doing women's history. She challenges that 'it is true that the evidence is scanty, but it is scarcely thinner than that adduced in support of claims made in Second Temple historiography, which have gained universal acceptance' (1999: 31; see Grossman 2003). In other words, whatever assumptions guide the work of history, they should not be applied disproportionately to the newer hypotheses concerning women. Skepticism should not serve as a tool for erasing more evidence of women than of men.

c. *Women in Jewish Texts*

While some, like Ilan, wrestle with a combination of assorted texts and other sources in order to look at the social realities of women in the world from which these texts emerged, others focus their energies on the close examination of a single text or genre, uncovering a myriad of layers and assumptions. Such studies consider the appearance of women within Philo (Sly 1990), or Josephus (Halpern-Amaru 1988; Brenner 2003), or the Dead Sea Scrolls (Schuller 1994), or the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (van der Horst 1986; A.-J. Levine 1989; Glancy 1993), or collected poetry by Jewish women through the ages (Hasan-Rokem *et al.* 1999).

A number of studies also focus on early rabbinic texts (Haas 1992; Boyarin 1993; Hauptman 1998; Valler 1999). To a certain extent works that examine one text or another can maintain a clearer sense that they write about literary worlds rather than social reality. Nevertheless, as various scholars of rabbinic literature present the rabbis as either sympathetic or unsympathetic to the concerns of women, the interpretative challenges appear in high relief. Hauptman, for instance, clearly states that 'Talmudists cannot assume that sociohistorical realities are accurately reflected in the law', yet she also acknowledges that this will sometimes be a struggle as she considers changes in particular laws (1998: 6). In contrast to Wegner's synchronic reading of the Mishnah, Hauptman interprets portions of Mishnah alongside 'the surrounding cluster of mishnahs' but also with other related rabbinic legal material. She deftly opens up diachronic readings and the malleable nature of laws that affect women. For instance, she traces developments from a mishnah that does not require a woman's consent in marriage, through passages in the Babylonian Talmud that do discuss consent, and moreover, 'narrow the definition of consent, clearly benefiting women' (Hauptman 1998: 71). She thus inspires new debates concerning the outcome of rabbinic legislation and what constitutes an 'ameliorative' change for women. Although for Hauptman the case of a 'doubtful betrothal', 'initiated' by a woman, appears to cede agency to a woman, others ask whether women gain by rabbinic acknowledgement since such a lack of clarity might put women in a worse position (1998: 5, 72; Gray 1998: 75, 78). Any answer to this question must struggle to find and interpret evidence for the lives of women alluded to by these rabbinic texts.

Meanwhile, even as the study of women in Early Judaism depends on advances in understanding individual texts, such understandings depend nevertheless on intertexts and ideas developed more extensively outside the

bounds of the text being scrutinized. Although Hauptman elects to consider legal contexts and announces her cautious approach so as to avoid reading legal texts as social history, nevertheless she reveals that one cannot always see where reading a narrative becomes making assumptions about social history. For instance, she does not consult other studies of sex in Hellenistic or Roman culture when she writes about a 'particular sage, who seemed to think that sexual relations in and of themselves were bad, had ceased sexual activity with his wife…but when a prostitute showed an interest in him, he immediately succumbed' (1998: 43). A myriad of discussions of self-control, asceticism and sexuality in antiquity raise questions about reading this passage as a straightforward narrative concerning rabbinic ideas of male–female relations.

Nevertheless, Hauptman's focus on women and rabbinic legal materials paves the way for those who follow with questions of their own. Alexander (2000) surveys the study of women in the Talmud, Weisberg (1998) examines laws pertaining to levirate marriage, and Lehman (2003) revisits the complex question of the exemption of women from commandments, in this case, Passover commandments. Lehman's conclusions once again challenge the easy divisions of public and private, in light of public rites to which women are in fact obligated, and not exempted. In addition she insists that we notice how the rabbis eschew clear-cut exclusions and instead treat each law individually as it pertains to women: 'Undoubtedly, rabbinic culture fostered gender asymmetry. Women are "other". However, despite their "otherness", women never fall short of evaluation and reevaluation' (2003: 56). Hauptman and the scholars who follow her address the complicated specifics of rabbinic literature and steer us away from glib generalizations about the status of women.

d. *Themed Treatments*

In each method there is a trade-off: the comparative approach must consider a great expanse of history and sources; the historical approach risks not doing enough comparative work while at the same time juggling any number of sources; an approach which examines one genre or text involves a more manageable number of sources, but may overlook historical and comparative issues. These methodological challenges do not belong uniquely to the study of women, but scholars with this goal may aim to correct the decades and centuries of histories that overlooked women and therefore tackle ambitious projects. Nonetheless, like many others before them, and in line with the vision of social history, researchers into the history of women discover that research into *one* aspect of women's lives can also

contribute to the larger goal. Thus one also finds projects with slightly more narrow foci, such as women in relationship to sexuality, family, marriage, the synagogue or magic. Methodological concerns remain, but perhaps can be more easily managed in the service of questions more narrow than asking after all aspects of the lives of women.

Concerning sexuality, mentioned above, Boyarin launches into a project that very much responds to comparative questions (1993; see also Fraade 1986). Invoking Foucault, Boyarin resolves not to look at Jewish texts 'in isolation from other concurrent socio-cultural practices' (1993: 12). He explains: 'Many critics have realized that these texts are essentially literary, that is, fictional accounts about men and (occasionally) women who probably lived but functioned primarily as signifiers of values within the culture' (1993: 10-11). Therefore Boyarin undertakes an 'examination of the discourse of gender in a culture that by and large does *not* operate with the system of dualistic oppositions…to ask what difference the different cultural configurations of its gender asymmetry made' (1993: 29). Pursuing these configurations, he examines the men, women and the complex relationship of gender, desire and Torah study (1993: 134-225). Boyarin also succeeds in provoking alternative readings of the texts he interprets (A. Cohen 1998; Valler 1999; Rubenstein 2003; Diamond 2004). Such focused questions make for rich dialogue on the nature of the women and men he explores.

Other projects have developed other aspects of the picture of women's lives in the ancient world. Cohen edited a collection on the Jewish family in the Hellenistic and Roman periods that provides important explorations from a variety of perspectives that corroborate and challenge each other, including a look at households, parenting, slaves and more (S.J.D. Cohen 1993; see also A.-J. Levine 2003; and D. Kraemer 1989 edited a volume on Jewish family, but only some of its pieces concern this period). Helpful explorations can also be found in volumes examining Christian families (Moxnes 1997; Balch and Osiek 1997 and 2003). Satlow explores Jewish marriage (2001) considering a range of different sources, Jewish historical trends and rich comparative explorations (see for instance Tregiarri 1991; Evans Grubbs 1995; see Lapin 2001b). My work considers the way women appear in wedding rituals (Marks 2003). Several scholars continue the exploration of women in synagogues that Brooten had pioneered (most recently Horbury 1999; Rajak 1999; and Brooten 2000). Meanwhile Lesses considers Jewish women as sorceresses, and otherwise associated with magic (2001). Each of these explorations challenges and/or enlarges upon the insights of previous studies.

5. *Discovering Constructed Women*

Amidst this array of projects unearthing ancient women one finds a noticeable gap. There are very few treatments that even attempt to explore what the bodies of ancient women were like (until Fonrobert 2000; and Baker 2002; see section 6 below). Satlow examines male rabbinic ideas of female beauty (1998). Several articles struggle with understanding hair and head styles in the ancient world, perhaps including some struggle between cultural expectations and a (sometimes) resisting (or otherwise motivated) agent, as in the women of uncovered hair in Corinthians (Thompson 1988; D'Angelo 1995; M. Levine 1995). Nevertheless, the bodies of ancient Jewish women eluded intensive study. With this realization comes the (glimpsed but held at bay) recognition that exclusively external presentations of women's lives may in fact have very little, if anything, in common with actual women. At this point one comes towards the end of what can be understood only by revisiting and collecting overlooked evidence concerning the lives of women, and one encounters the realization that post-structuralist reexaminations of history may provide additional avenues of exploration. In other words, one enters the third phase in research into women in Early Judaism.

Peskowitz (1997b) led the way in examining presentations of Jewish women while simultaneously grappling with underlying constructions of gender. In an in-depth consideration of the relationship of women to the 'women's work' of weaving, Peskowitz compares archeological evidence for looms in this period with descriptions found in talmudic and other rabbinic texts (1997b: 77-94). She thereby offers the startling observation that the looms that rabbis present women as using were old-fashioned, not the most recent available technology, as suggested by material remains. She concludes that these rabbinic texts do not seek to describe actual women weaving, but rather to construct weaving women based on a myriad of cultural concerns: 'Through vivid passages that place the warp-weighted loom near the bodies of women, the warp-weighted loom itself is feminized and technology itself becomes gendered [and]…concepts of newness and innovation were masculinized' (1997b: 91). She finds this so at looms, at other forms of labor and at the market place. Startlingly, Peskowitz uses the details of rabbinic texts to dislodge their presentation of women from any easy association with the lives of women.

Peskowitz introduces her readers to the extent to which cultural constructions reshape seemingly straightforward narratives. While earlier scholars did recognize the agendas of the texts they studied (see the discus-

sion of Wegner in section 3 above), the recognition that all texts describe constructions of gender rests on the postmodern realization that texts not only consciously construct new realities, but do so unintentionally as well. The rabbinic authors of the texts described by Peskowitz may or may not have realized that they situated women with antiquated technology. As authors they had access to only some of what they encoded. Nevertheless, in Peskowitz's work these ideas are not merely theoretical. With in-depth material and textual explorations she insists that we recognize how these rabbinic texts functioned and consider the constructions of gender that emerged, as the presentations of the lives of women were overwritten by other concerns.

6. *Returning to the Sources in Light of Constructed Women*

The goal for the most recent wave of scholars studying Jewish women in the ancient world involves charting the 'construction of women' without altogether losing sight of the 'real' women who existed somewhere beyond the text. This is true of many whose work has already been discussed in earlier sections; it remains only to explore examples of the most explicit wrestling. We see R.S. Kraemer making such a move to reconsider social reality in the reissue of her 1988 source book (2004). Where earlier she had felt comfortable describing the social reality of the Therapeutrides, here she must balance a 'glimpse' of social reality with the recognition of constructions of gender: 'Although Philo provides relatively little concrete information about either Jewish women or Jewish men in first-century Alexandria, occasional observations and hints are interspersed through-out his writings, which also make extensive use of gender as a category of analysis and interpretation' (R.S. Kraemer 2004: 28). Kraemer's shift reflects the interim between 1988 and 2004, in which debates concerning Philo's realism moved to center stage. For instance Engberg-Pedersen presents Philo's work as a philosopher's dream. He illustrates how ancients might have distrusted utopias: 'Note also how Lucian distances himself from what he merely sees as entertaining forms of lying and expresses his wonder *if* these authors (really) thought that they could go undetected when writing up plain untruths.' From this he concludes: 'If Philo was writing in a similar climate, it is entirely reasonable that he should have chosen to make his own case of utopian fantasy appear as close to historical fact as at all possible' (Engberg-Pedersen 1999: 47; see also Taylor 2003). Here we observe caution concerning not only the construction of philosophic women, but of the entire community.

On the other hand, the focus on 'construction' allows new ways to address old questions. Within half a decade of Peskowitz, Fonrobert presents the first book-length treatment concerning the bodies of Jewish women in the ancient world (2000). Fonrobert considers presentations of menstruation and purity, with the construction of gender firmly in her sights:

> …even these narratives [about women presenting evidence of their blood to rabbinic experts for evaluation] are not necessarily about 'real' women and their practice. Second, they present women as functioning within a cultural system that the rabbinic texts are only beginning to institute, hence already on the receiving end of rabbinic discourse (2000: 7).

Fonrobert moves most helpfully beyond recognizing the difficulty of accessing 'real' women in order to focus on the *ways* that these textual discourses construct gender.

Fonrobert builds upon Peskowitz, who observed that 'we modern readers tend to read…rabbinic passages as if we were rabbis and shared their position as men' (Peskowitz 1997b: 53; Fonrobert 2000: 219 n. 13). Fonrobert too investigates the world constructed by the text: 'Women are imagined as the dwellings of their husbands, but not vice versa. One major task of our reading of texts in Tractate Niddah is to find textual and discursive mechanisms that enable such a perspective and enable the reader of such texts to remain ignorant of the gender marking of projected perspectives' (2000: 8-9). She uses Greek and Latin gynecological literature for comparative and historic exploration of talmudic sources, but also to continue her postmodern agenda, 'We can look at both bodies of text [Soranus and Galen, and Talmud] as products of a cultural impulse to make women's bodies accessible to language, to epistemology and the inquiring male mind' (2000: 10). In response to the bodies of women that appear only in external presentations Fonrobert focuses on the theoretical tools and the textual fabric that clothes and constructs these bodies, so that if we may not understand from within, we may at least follow the mechanisms at work in such constructs.

In a different postmodern gesture, Grossman insists upon simultaneously considering several possible trajectories of textual presentations of women (2004). She explicitly builds upon the Qumran scholarship of Schuller (1994 and 1998) whose own work on gender had recognized that 'the androcentrism reflected in the scrolls, and…their focus on male covenanters does not preclude the presence of women as participants in the covenant community' (Grossman 2004: 215). From this starting point Grossman investigates how one might move from a presentation in the scrolls to any kind of

social history, answering this methodological challenge with an insistence upon multiplicity. She explicitly draws on reception history and the audience oriented approach of Fish (1980), demonstrating that the social reality one imagines varies depending upon the intertexts that one consciously (and presumably unconsciously) supplies.

Grossman shows that the *Damascus Document* appears different when one reads it alongside other texts from Qumran. When one reads it in light of Deuteronomy, it can appear to reference a more inclusive community, wherein a 'woman joining the covenant community might thus be seen simply as another member, one of those who "each" joins, of "his" (which here includes "her") own volition' (2004: 227). Grossman explains that even if women might have authority in 'highly constrained ways', such a reading also hints 'at a much more active role in the community than our initial androcentric reading of the text suggested' (2004: 228). On the other hand, when one reads the *Damascus Document* together with the more egalitarian 4Q502 ('identified variously as a marriage document, a "golden age" ritual, and a new year's celebration text' [2004: 229]) or the more misogynist 4Q184 *Wiles of the Wicked Woman*, the text changes again. Read with the *Wiles of the Wicked Woman*:

> If the masculine plural language in the *Damascus Document* is inter-preted as a reference only to male covenanters—or to men outside the covenant who have been lured to temptation by wicked women—then it follows that the only significant references to women in the text are those that focus on sexually-related subjects (2004: 233).

With each new introduction of an intertext, Grossman produces a new plausible reading, and the certainty of choosing only one interpretation takes us beyond available evidence. Grossman's mechanism for finding historical women accesses not only those women who have been barred from our sight, but several sets of 'those women' who must remain vividly possible, although each challenges the certainty of the others. Like the later Ilan (1999), Grossman recognizes that her interpretations are hypothetical, but her process implies that so much else that has passed for definitive ought to be recast as interesting possibilities.

Baker (2002) uses a different approach to explore those historical women that have been hidden from our sight. She consciously investigates the invisibility of women both to modern scholars and in ancient texts. She considers how the construction of visibility and invisibility affects early Jewish women. In order to do this she juxtaposes archaeological and textual evidence, but she also always keeps our attention on 'sight lines'. In

order to consider the relevant archaeological evidence she must first challenge essentialist assumptions that 'women's spaces' are easily recognized. Although these preconceptions may not be as explicitly sexist as those encountered by Brooten twenty years before, they nonetheless bar access to understanding where and how women lived. Baker looks at the supposed segregation of women in ancient Jewish households. She reveals contradictions in such assertions by comparing two modern accounts, one claiming that women's quarters 'allow[ed] females to leave and return to the innermost household spaces without meeting [male] parties in the courtyard', and another that 'men's apartments were situated on the public side of the house while those of the women were in the interior and were inaccessible from the courtyard except by way of the men's quarters'. The lack of accommodation in accounts causes Baker to conclude 'these domestic gender maps, it seems, result from a number of problematic interpretive moves' (Baker 2002: 16-17, citing Small 1987: 116 and Archer 1990: 116). After all, in such imagined segregated space historical women could not have been both removed from all contact with men and have encountered them as enforcers of their exclusion.

Instead Baker examines new evidence for more porous and social domestic spaces (2002: 37), thus revisiting the whole idea of a public/private dichotomy, which, as we saw above, has long been a source of concern to some feminist scholars. In place of investing in this dichotomy of space, Baker instead considers how space contributes to what one sees and how one is seen. She does this explicitly with regard to Foucauldian considerations of surveillance in the form of the 'panopticon', and, by extension, its opposite, or what Baker calls an 'anopticon', describing 'an architecture that, generally speaking, inhibits direct surveillance; it often interrupts or deflects the gaze' (2002: 45). Baker suggests that interpreting households as rigid structures ignores ways that:

> The house, both as 'viewing mechanism' and as framework of signification, plays a critical role in gendering—and in a rabbinically imagined world, at least, in the edification of women, in particular. It is rarely a blunt weapon or a static object, almost never a confining cage that it has almost universally been read to be (2002: 75).

Baker indicates that segregating women within the house would be unnecessary: 'In fact, far from signaling or reinforcing special confinement, *woman-as-house* [discussed further below] *renders all such imagined locational strictures irrelevant and redundant*' (76, her italics). If we import inappropriate ideas of segregated space, we miss both the particularities of evidence

of buildings in the Galilee and the complexity of how these texts construct gender.

Baker addresses the rabbinic idea that a woman/wife can actually be referred to as a 'house', also explored adeptly by others interested in women and gender (Fonrobert 2000; Labovitz 2002). She recognizes that this label describes female genitals as housing male genitals. Nevertheless, she interprets the 'woman-as-house' metaphor as alluding to more than a container, invoking Bourdieu to explore the habitual processes by which houses and inhabitants shape each other (2002: 57-58, 189). Baker emphasizes the asymmetrical constructions of gender, so that when 'a female body is rendered "house" in the same moment and movement in which woman is rendered "wife"', we observe that 'she "serves", "purifies", and "sets in order", her house, whereas he "masters" his' (2002: 58). Baker explores the habits shaped by this understanding of 'house', the ways that these habits shaped how others saw women, and then, in turn, shaped women themselves, as they moved from home to market and back again. The way a woman presented her head, whether covered or uncovered, and how she examined her menstrual flow,

> …these regulated routines and habits assume—or enforce—an orientation toward men on the part of women. In other words, it is the sexualized *male* gaze against which a woman deploys her matron's headgear, and it is precisely because she is the wife *of a man* that she is able/entitled/ required to do so. Similarly, the cleaning, purifying, and setting in order of 'her house' are acts characterized as done primarily with regard to sexual relations *with her husband*; and although it is 'her house' that she tends in this fashion, 'her house', as observed above, is always '*his* house', as well (2002: 74; original emphasis).

Baker explains that in this move from hers to his, 'yet again is woman/wife constituted through acts of self-erasure and displacement' (2002: 74). These habits of body, not the walls of the house, shaped the women of the house.

Baker thus presents this 'viewing mechanism' in contrast to previously assumed blunt instruments. She asks:

> Did Jewish women actually live this way? We do not, and cannot, know. Tragically, the enforced anopticism described here has as its literary counterpart anonymity: …we can do little more than guess at the extent to which such walls and doorways, paths and persons intersected with those imagined by the rabbis (2002: 74-75).

Like Grossman, Baker offers us possibilities but not certainties. She clears away enclosed chambers and leaves multi-use rooms, demonstrating that

women are there, but not fixed in one identifiable space. She offers us a new vision: one that may not feel as empowering as that offered by Brooten twenty years earlier, but one that, nevertheless, moves us closer to the world of Jewish women in antiquity. Baker's research shows that scholars have been superimposing models of segregation from other cultures and times, and therefore causing us to distort reconstructions of the environments in which women lived. Moreover, she illustrates that by accepting distorted architectural spaces scholars have also overlooked the constructions of gender that these Jewish women knew, as well as the choreography of gendered presentations that formed an important part of their lives.

7. *Conclusion*

At the end of this search for women in Early Judaism we thus find exciting current research into methods that offer traces but not the certainties of earlier work. The search itself teaches much about the ancient world, and about post-structuralist insights that make the historian's task both exciting and frustrating. Twenty-five years ago Bernadette Brooten found women where others had overlooked them because they hadn't expected them. That served as a wake-up call, and the search was on for the fifty percent of the ancient population that had all too often escaped notice. Current scholars continue to pursue this goal and to resist returning to assuming the invisibility and inaction of women. Nevertheless, twenty-five years after Brooten one encounters the limits of the data that had for a brief hour appeared open-ended.

This article moved chronologically through adventures in discovering and recovering women and then viewing them once again from a distance. Such a chronology reflects the occurrence of certain publications, but also, unfortunately, oversimplifies the complexity of these imbricated research trends. Although working prior to the explosion of post-structuralist theory, the early discoverers and recoverers of evidence for the lives of women often worked with a healthy distrust of how texts reflected reality, as part of their method. Meanwhile the later deconstructionists depend upon the wealth recovered by prior and contemporaneous scholars, and such work is by no means finished. Twenty-five years ago Brooten had to explicitly challenge assumptions concerning how women might reasonably have been expected to act. Twenty years later Baker also had to explicitly challenge assumptions concerning how women might reasonably have been expected to act. Brooten took on the assumption that women could not have been leaders. Baker took on ideas about secluded women. In other words, we began with a current that continues; namely, the need to consider the inap-

propriateness of the narrow limits that had heretofore been understood to circumscribe the lives of women.

The feminist approaches of the past couple of decades have forced us to rethink outdated presentations of the ancient world. As these feminist approaches evolve in light of post-structuralist ideas we also learn to accept uncertainty in our conclusions, and to reenvision the world wherein the 'individuals' described are often 'constructions'. If we experience a sense of loss in accepting these 'constructions' and seeing 'women' that we thought we understood now appearing more distant, then as compensation we find that the richly-drawn analyses of these constructions provide ever more complex glimpses into these cultures that so fascinate us. If the study of Jewish women has been successful, and it has, it is because it caused us to rethink assumptions about women in these societies, and thereby caused us to see the societies themselves in new ways. When we removed obfuscating assumptions that had been imported from other periods and other times we found new insights into Early Judaism.

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