

17 THE ROLE OF JEWISH WOMEN IN THE RELIGION, RITUAL AND CULT OF GRAECO-ROMAN PALESTINE

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In the first century AD, the historian Josephus wrote:

There is endless variety in the details of the customs and laws which prevail in the world at large . . . some people have entrusted the supreme political power to monarchies, others to oligarchies, yet others to the masses. Our lawgiver, however, [that is, Moses] was attracted by none of these forms of policy, but gave to his constitution the form of what may be termed a 'theocracy'. . . He did not make religion a department of virtue but the various virtues . . . departments of religion.

Thus, Josephus declared, 'Religion governs all our actions and occupations and speech; none of these things did our lawgiver leave unexamined or indeterminate.' The historian concluded his description of the all-embracing character of Jewish religious law in the life of Hellenistic Palestine with the statement: '. . . even our womenfolk and dependants would tell you that piety must be the motive for all our occupations' (*Con. Ap.* II:164f.). The aim of this paper is to examine the extent to which women were permitted to give public expression, through participation in the nation's religion, ritual and cult, to the piety which governed their lives. In order to gain the fullest appreciation of their role in the religion of Hellenistic Palestine (c. 300 BC-c. AD 200), however, we must first pause and briefly trace the history of their involvement in the centuries which preceded the period under consideration.

From the earlier strands of the Old Testament, it is apparent that women in the pre-exilic period of Hebrew history (i.e., before 587 BC) enjoyed a certain active involvement in the nation's religious affairs. In the biblical narratives they appear together with men at public assemblies and expositions of the Law (see, e.g., *Ex.* 35:1f.; *Deut.* 29.9f., 31:12-13), participate fully in the annual cycle of festivals (e.g., *I Sam.* 2:19; *II Kgs.* 23:21; *II Chron.* 35), often in the role of singers and dancers (e.g., *Ex.* 15:20-21; *Judg.* 21:21; *Jer.* 31:4; *Ps.* 68:12,

26-27), feature as prophetesses (e.g., *Judg.* 4:4f.; *II Sam.* 20:16f.; *II Kgs.* 22:14f.) and as persons who generally have a special association with the holy men (*Judg.* 13:6f.; *II Kgs.* 4:23f.), and are seen in attendance at shrines and sanctuaries as sacred prostitutes and in other cultic capacities (e.g., *Gen.* 38; *Ex.* 38:8; *I Sam.* 2:22; *Hos.* 4:13-14).¹

Significantly, however, the period to which these texts refer was one in which that rigid monotheism so characteristic of later Judaism had not as yet developed. Polytheistic, or rather Baalistic, belief and worship flourished and shrines to the various deities, Yahweh included, dotted the countryside. Prominent among these deities were the goddesses, who included in their number Anath (the Queen of Heaven), Asherah and Ishtar, and it was with these cults that women were especially associated (e.g., *Judg.* 3:7; *I Kgs.* 11:5f., 15:13; *II Kgs.* 23:7; *Jer.* 7:18, 44:15f.). In the course of time, however, the monotheistic principle began to assert itself. Gradually (see also the paper of P. Ackroyd, this volume) the god Yahweh was elevated to a position of supremacy over all other deities. With this rise to power of a single male deity and the concomitant lessening in status of the other members of the Israelite Pantheon (especially its female members), the role played by women in public religion began to diminish. The first step in that direction was taken when the early Hebrew legislators, in a deliberate move intended to establish the worship of Yahweh, forbade the practice of sacred prostitution, this ritual being fundamental to the non-Yahwistic cults and also one in which women played a central role (*Deut.* 23:18-19. Cf. *I Kgs.* 15:12; *II Kgs.* 23:7). Women were further removed from cultic activity when the Yahwists forced the abolition of all rural shrines and centralised worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, a move which was again designed to rid the land of undesirable cults (cf. *I Kgs.* 6ff.). At this central sanctuary there was no place for female officiants as the Temple's affairs were regarded as the sole responsibility of an organised, hereditary male priesthood dedicated to the service of Yahweh.² The fact that only men could serve as priests was of course the result of the rigid patriarchy which by this time structured and organised the lives of the Jewish people. Under such a social system all positions of leadership — in government, religious life, tribe and family — lay in the hands of men and passed along the male line.

But Yahweh's victory was not won overnight. The books of *Kings* and *II Chronicles* bear witness to the way in which, as late as the sixth century BC, worship of the old gods and goddesses continued throughout the land of Israel, and even, on occasions, at the Temple in Jerusalem itself. Ironically, Yahweh's final victory came with the destruction of

His Temple at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BC. For generations prior to this calamity, the prophets of Israel had been warning the people that if they did not abandon their syncretistic ways, the wrath of the one true God would descend upon them. The destruction of the Temple and the exile to Babylonia were thus viewed as the dramatic realisation of these doom prophecies and as final proof of the absolute power of the jealous God, Yahweh.

The traumatic events of the sixth century thus occasioned a fundamental rethinking of the position of the Hebrews *vis-à-vis* their God and His Covenantal Law and marked a watershed in the history of Judaism. Convinced that their present tragedy was the result of God's righteous wrath, the exiles set about ridding themselves of all impurity in an effort to regain His favour. To this end, all records of the past were zealously preserved and older, more primitive legal traditions extensively reworked and edited in the light of their developing concepts and attitudes. Innovatory ideas emerged such as that of Israel being the suffering servant of the Lord, a people with a special mission in the world. Monotheism was rigorously reaffirmed, God's power and majesty underlined, and stress laid upon the peculiar relation which existed between God and His chosen people.³ Of particular significance and far-reaching consequence to the lives of women was the exilic legislators' obsession with ritual cleanness. In order to create a people which was truly holy to God, the religious leaders of the time formulated a complex of laws whose specific purpose was the encouragement of purity on both an individual and communal level.⁴ The primitive blood taboo which lay behind so many of the Hebrews' ideas about purity led to women being declared unclean for a large part of their lives in consequence of the blood of childbirth and of the menstrual cycle. The exilic book of *Leviticus* dealt in detail with the pollution which resulted from contact with women during these periods and prescribed vital purification rituals to avert danger. Further precautions were taken by severely restricting the movement of women during their times of uncleanness. In particular, no one in a state of ritual impurity was allowed to enter the Temple or participate in cultic activities. Thus *Lev. 12:2f.* decreed that, 'If a woman be delivered and bear a man-child, then she shall be unclean seven days . . . and she shall continue in the blood of purification thirty-three days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification be fulfilled. But if she bear a maid-child, then she shall be unclean two weeks and shall continue in the blood of purification sixty-six days.' During the time of menstrual uncleanness — which consisted of the days of bleeding

plus seven days purification – women were similarly forbidden to enter the Temple, for as Yahweh declared in *Lev. 15:31*: 'Thus shall ye separate the children of Israel from their uncleanness; that they die not from their uncleanness when they defile my Tabernacle that is in the midst of them.'⁵

The time to begin putting these new ideas into effect came with the emergence of Cyrus (539-30 BC) who, in the first year of his reign, issued a decree ordering the restoration of the Jewish community and cult in Palestine (*Ezra 1:1-4, 6:3-5*). By 515 BC the restored community had re-established the centralised worship of Yahweh and had rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. Some years later, under the inspiration of the scribal priest Ezra, a huge assembly of both men and women was called, and the Law as revised and edited during the time in exile was publicly read. At this public reading, to use the words of Nehemiah, '... all those that had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands unto the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone that had knowledge and understanding ... entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and to do all the commandments of the Lord ...' (*10:29f.*). To ensure that the people did not revert to their old ways, the start of this Second Temple period also saw the beginning of a programme of formal education which in the course of the next few centuries was to develop into a comprehensive system of schooling designed to bring knowledge of the Torah to all members of the Jewish community, rich and poor, aristocrat and ordinary citizen alike. As we shall see, however, women were not destined to be a part of this education programme.

Another move which was to have far-reaching consequence for women's role in religion was the development of a different familial structure. Again to make the Torah a living force in the land and to guard against assimilation and idolatrous practice, the post-exilic community sought to strengthen its inner bonding by reinforcing the basic social unit of the family. As a result of the increasing sophistication of Hebrew life and thought monogamous unions were encouraged, married children were urged to set up separate households, and archaic practices such as concubinage and the levirate virtually disappeared. In other words, the older system of the extended patriarchal family gave way to the nuclear family.⁶ With this move towards the nuclear structured family, there developed an increasing rigidity in attitude towards and definition of function within the family group: the woman's role was placed firmly in the private sphere of activity as wife, mother and

homemaker, whilst that of the man was located in the public sphere as worker and family supporter and as active participant in social, political and religious affairs (see *Prov.* 31:10f.). These two post-exilic developments – that is, the concentration upon ritual purity and the sharp differentiation in male-female social function – were gradually to exclude women from nearly all public expressions of piety.

By the time we reach the Hellenistic period (from c. 300 BC), therefore, Yahweh's rule was firmly established and the Torah, as formulated in the exile and beyond, dominated the lives of the Jewish people – to such an extent that in the first century AD, Josephus was able to coin the term 'theocracy' to describe their state of polity. It might, however, be more exact to use the term 'nomocracy', for the Torah as delivered by God to Moses was essentially a holy Law, a Covenant whose basic element was the commandment, or rather a series of commandments designed to encompass the Israelites' every moment.⁷ According to later Jewish thinkers the enumeration of these commandments was as follows: 'Six hundred and thirteen precepts were given to Moses – three hundred and sixty five of them are negative commandments, like the number of days of the solar year, and two hundred and forty eight are positive commandments corresponding to the parts of the human body' (*Makk.* 23b). Although this figure should not be taken too literally (as demonstrated by the obvious artificiality of the equation), the statement does indicate the all-pervasive nature of the commandments in Jewish life.⁸

The question which we have to ask is, were women obliged to observe all these commandments? The answer to this is no, for although in principle fulfilment of the Law in its entirety was laid upon both men and women (witness the way in which women were present at the original delivery of the Law at Mount Sinai and at its public reading under Ezra where they, together with their menfolk, entered into the curse already mentioned), the rabbis of our period declared women exempt from nearly all of the positive precepts whose fulfilment depended upon a specific time of the day or of the year (*Kidd.* 1:7). Thus, for example, women were under no obligation to circumcise their sons or to take them to the Temple for the ritual redemption of the first-born (*idem*); they were exempt from making the thrice yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (*Hag.* 1:1); from living in the ceremonial booths which were erected at the feast of Tabernacles (*Sukk.* 2:8); from shaking the Lulab (*Tos. Kidd.* 1:10); sounding the Shofar at the new year (*Tos. R.H.* 4:1); reading the Megillah at Purim (*Tos. Meg.* 2:7); and from

making the daily affirmation of faith, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One' (*Ber.* 3:3). Women's exemption from these time-gear'd precepts was the direct result both of their extensive periods of ritual impurity and of their designated role as closeted homemakers. Unclean and in a state of domestic seclusion, they thus became increasingly less involved in matters of public religion, and the situation quickly developed wherein their non-participation was viewed in terms of exclusion rather than mere exemption. Out of consideration of these various factors, women were also exempt from the one general precept whose fulfilment was central to the entire religious system — study of Torah.⁹ Women thus had no share in the system of formal schooling which flourished in Palestine during the Hellenistic period, and in consequence of their ignorance of the Law, were further removed from the possibility of giving public expression to their piety.¹⁰ We might also note that even if women did observe the commandments from which they were exempt, then it benefited them nothing, for the rabbis placed them in the category of 'one who is not commanded and fulfills', a Talmudic expression meaning that the action was without value (*Sot.* 21a). Women were, however, subject to all of the negative commandments and failure to observe those resulted in the full weight of the penal code descending upon them (*Kidd.* 35a; *Pes.* 43a).

If women did accompany their menfolk to the Temple when the latter were fulfilling the command to appear before the Lord, then their role was one of passive onlooker rather than active participant, for they were not allowed into the inner precincts where the main activity of the cult, that is, sacrifice, was conducted. Indeed, they were often not even allowed into the outer courts, for as Josephus writes: 'All who ever saw our Temple are aware of the general design of the building and the inviolable barriers which preserve its sanctity. It had four surrounding courts, each with its special statutory restrictions. The outer court was open to all, foreigners included; during their time of impurity women alone were refused admission. To the second court all Jews were permitted and, when uncontaminated by any defilement, their wives; to the third, male Jews [alone], if clean and purified; to the fourth, the priests . . .' (*Con. Ap.* II:102f. Cf. *Ant.* 15:418f.; *B.J.* 5:193f., espec. 227; *Kel.* 1:6-9). The system of court within court, each gradually increasing in holiness, eventually led to the sanctuary itself which was situated in the centre of the Temple complex and was called the Holy of Holies. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter that area, and then only once a year (*Kel.* 1:9). The business of sacrifice was conducted in the Court of Priests, and to this court male Israelites were permitted to

bring their private offerings, which were then sacrificed by the priests at the altar of unhewn stone (*Kel.* 1:8). Only rarely were women granted admission to this inner court for, as the Mishnah records, 'The rites of laying on of hands [on the beast's head before its slaughter], of waving, bringing near [the meal-offering], taking the handful and burning it, wringing the necks of the bird-offerings, sprinkling the blood [of the offerings on the altar] and receiving the blood . . . these are performed by men but not by women, excepting in the meal-offering of the suspected adulteress and of the female nazirite for which they themselves perform the act of waving' (*Kidd.* 1:8).¹¹ It is possible, however, that even for these exceptions women were not allowed into the inner area, for *Sot.* 1:5 records that at least in the case of the suspected adulteress, the offering was to be made at the Eastern Gate which lay over against the Gate of Nicanor, the latter being the entrance which separated the Court of Women from the Court of Israelites. We might also note that nazirites (dedicated ascetics) were by this time something of a dying breed and so the other exception listed in the Mishnah might not have had any reality.¹² Women were also disqualified from making the avowal at the offering of first-fruits and from sprinkling the water and mixing the ashes at the ceremony of the Red Heifer (*Bikk.* 1:5; *Parah* 5:4, 12:10), and from eating hallowed things in the Temple (*Bikk.* 4:3). Occasionally, however, and despite the mishnaic ruling, women were permitted to perform the ritual of laying on of hands — presumably on those occasions when the offering was of a particularly personal nature (such as a sin offering or the sacrifice demanded for the purification after childbirth), but the comment of the Gemara (the post-AD 200 commentary on the Mishnah) regarding this practice was: 'Not that it was customary for women, but that it was to appease the women' (*Hag.* 16b). In the main, where sacrificial ritual was concerned, women in the formula of the Talmud were coupled with gentiles, slaves, children, imbeciles, deaf-mutes, and persons of doubtful or double sex, all of whom were excluded from participation in the Temple's cultic affairs. They remained in the outer, less hallowed, area of the so-called Court of Women (a title which was in fact something of a misnomer as men had free access to this precinct), removed from the activity of the inner recesses of the Temple proper.¹³

It is moreover possible that on one occasion in the year women were further distanced from the ceremonial, for included in the Mishnah's account of the celebrations which took place at the close of the first day of the feast of Tabernacles is found the following report: 'Before-time [the Court of Women] was free of buildings, but [afterward] they

surrounded it with a gallery, so that the women should behold from above and the men from below, and that they should not mingle together' (*Midd.* 2:5. Cf. *Sukk.* 5:2; *Tos. Sukk.* 4:1). From this gallery, according to *Sukk.* 5:4, women watched as the men below celebrated the feast's water libation to the accompaniment of music, songs, dances and illuminations. The reason given at a later date by the rabbis for this segregation of the sexes was the fear that the feast's riotous nature would encourage immoral behaviour among the participants (*Kidd.* 81a). However, too much stress should not be laid upon the existence of this gallery, for the evidence regarding it is both meagre and confused.¹⁴ In any case, there seems to be no indication in the sources that this gallery – even if it existed – was used at any other time in the year, despite the confident assertions to that effect by some scholars.

We may now turn to examining the role of women in the synagogue, an institution of very different character to that of the Temple. Whatever the exact origins of this institution – and conjectures on that subject differ enormously¹⁵ – it is certain that by the late Second Temple period (the Second Temple period lasting from the sixth century BC to AD 70) it was a well-established feature of Jewish religious life, for rabbinic sources, the New Testament and Josephus all bear witness to the existence of synagogues throughout Palestine by the first century AD.

The primary function of the synagogue was to serve as a place for public reading of the Torah, and the main day upon which people assembled to hear the Law was the Sabbath, though readings also took place on Mondays, Thursdays and high holidays. As these Scripture readings, which followed a cyclical sequence, were intended to be instructive rather than merely devotional, they were accompanied both by an interpretative translation from the Hebrew and by a sermon. The synagogue thus served as a central element of the Jewish educational system.

As a general extension of women's exemption from the time-gearred precepts and in consequence of their non-obligation to study Torah, women were not required to attend the synagogue. Only men could make up the quorum of ten which was necessary for a service, and if less than ten men were in attendance, even though women were present, then the congregation, to use the words of Mishnah, '... may not recite the Shema with its benedictions, nor may one go up before the Ark, nor may they lift up their hands, nor may they read [the prescribed portion of] the Law or the reading from the Prophets . . .' (*Meg.* 4:3).¹⁶ Similarly, only men were allowed to read from the Torah scroll, for

although women were in theory eligible, it was not customary for them to obey the public call to read. Thus the Talmud declared that, 'All are qualified to be among the seven [who read on sabbath mornings], even a minor and a woman, but a woman should not be allowed to come forward to read out of respect for the congregation' (*Meg.* 23a). The reason for this exclusion on the grounds of 'respect for the congregation' is nicely analysed by R. Loewe who writes that,

... the ineligibility of women ... (to act) ... as leaders in prayer for congregations including men (rests) on the principle that whereas obligation may be fulfilled by a plurality of those liable to it acting cooperatively, one of their number taking the lead and the others consciously fulfilling their obligation in unison with him, the situation would be quite otherwise were the quasi-representative figure not under an obligation of precisely analogous quality to that of the remainder of the congregation.¹⁷

Loewe also points to the significant fact that the Hebrew expression for 'officiant' at a service literally means 'agent of a group'. In consequence of their non-obligation, therefore, women were unable to act in this capacity.

It is also likely that women sat apart from the men who were conducting the service, for a characteristic of the Second Commonwealth (i.e. the Second Temple period) was an increased morbidity where free mingling of the sexes was concerned.¹⁸ We cannot say, however, exactly what form this probable separation of the sexes took. Many modern scholars have argued for the existence of special women's galleries or for the presence of lattice-work screens, but their conclusions rest heavily upon meagre evidence imaginatively manipulated in the light of present-day Jewish practice. Thus, for example, Avi-Yonah, writing of the excavations at Beth Alpha — a Galilean synagogue of basilica design, late 5th or 6th century AD — says: 'The remains furnish no evidence that would establish the existence of a second storey, but it is reasonable to assume that there was one and that a women's gallery was built on top of the two colonnades and above the vestibule.'¹⁹ Similarly, the archaeologist Sukenik was so convinced that this synagogue had a women's gallery that he even drew into his ground plans a special access stairway without its actually existing and assumed the existence of a similar staircase for the basilica synagogue of Chorazin (3rd-4th century AD).²⁰ Of the synagogue at Hammath by Gadara (4th century AD), the same scholar — although admitting that the remains were practically

confined to the foundations and that it was consequently impossible to hazard a restoration of the superstructure — stated that: 'It may, however, confidently be inferred that the basilica was provided with a gallery for women worshippers, from the massive pillars at the north eastern and north western corners of the colonnade . . .'.²¹ From these and other sites Sukenik concluded that ' . . . most [Palestinian] synagogue ruins have preserved unmistakable traces of a gallery'. In fact, however, of the Galilean synagogues thus far excavated, only Susiya (4th-5th century AD) has remains of stairs appropriate for a gallery and possibly Kefir Bir'im (3rd-4th century AD) (but here they appear with a question mark in the restoration plan).²² In the oldest synagogue so far revealed, that of Masada (1st century BC), there is no trace of steps, galleries or screen bases, a point of some significance when one recalls that this synagogue was used for some time by religious zealots. And, of course, even if it could be proved that galleries were common in ancient synagogues, that fact alone would not mean conclusively that their purpose was to provide for women at worship. Our literary sources, even those as late as the Middle Ages, remain silent on the whole subject of galleries, screens or other areas specifically designated for female worshippers. Abrahams advances the theory that such special areas arose in the late thirteenth century when it was customary for men and women to spend the night of Yom Kippur in the synagogue.²³ From the evidence so far available, therefore, it is impossible to say what form the segregation of the sexes took, though the likelihood that they were segregated — for the reasons already mentioned — remains. Possibly women simply sat at the back of the synagogue quietly observing the service in progress. Whatever the answer to these problems, however, it is certain that women's role was once again that of passive onlooker rather than active participant. An order issued by St Paul to disciples in Corinth bears witness to the attitude current among the Jews of the first century. He wrote: 'As in all the churches of the Saints, the women should keep silence . . . they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate as even the Law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home' (I *Cor.* 14:34-36. Cf. I *Tim.* 2:11-14). It is likely that in any case domestic duties, in particular the care of young children, frequently prevented women from regularly attending the synagogue. And here we might remember that the Law did not allow mothers to carry their infants outside the privacy of the home on the sabbath (*Shabb.* 18:12). An obvious consequence of this ruling was that women were housebound on precisely the day when the main assembly and exposition of

the Law took place.

In the ritual of the home women also had little role to play. They could not make up the number needed for the common grace or that required for the slaughter of the passover offering (*Ber.* 7:2; *Pes.* 8:7). Prayer was led by the men of the household, and in all matters of home ceremonial it was sons rather than daughters whose active participation was encouraged. This was in order to train boys to the observance of those commandments whose fulfilment would be their responsibility on reaching adulthood. An example of this differentiation in involvement is found in the Mishnah's description of the Seder ritual. As part of this ritual, the Bible made express provision for ceremonial questions on the history and meaning of the service to be asked by children of their parents. Significantly, this duty fell only to sons and never to daughters (*Pes.* 10:4). Women were, however, involved to some extent in the ritual which surrounded the weekly celebration of the Sabbath. The rabbis gave them the responsibility of lighting the lamps which heralded the start of the holiday and the duty of baking the two loaves which were required for the Sabbath's inaugural meal (*Shabb.* 2:6; *Ber.* 31a). The blessing of the loaves, however, was the men's responsibility.

All in all, about the only privilege left to women in Hellenistic Palestine was that of weeping — in other words, their one official position was that of publicly mourning the dead at funerals, an office common to women throughout the Near East (*Moed Katan* 3:8-9; *Ket.* 4:4. Cf. *Judg.* 11:40; *II Sam.* 14:2; *II Chron.* 35:25). They were also involved in certain other activities associated with the dead (*I Sam.* 28:7f.; *Mk.* 16:1; *Lk.* 23:55, 24:1). With regard to their ability to act in this capacity, however, two points must be made. Firstly, although women were prominent at funerals, they were not responsible for the mourners' benediction or for the performance of other religious duties (and I stress the word religious) designed to ensure the smooth passage of the dead. These duties were incumbent upon men alone (*Meg.* 4:3. Cf. *Tob.* 6:15; *Ahikar* 1:4-5). Secondly, those ritual areas of death in which women were involved belonged primarily to the shadowy region of popular superstition and were not the concern of Judaism proper (hence my earlier stress upon men's *religious* duties). Indeed, as Segal points out, the law codes contain conspicuously few references to such matters, the reason being that these practices, arising as they did from isolated events which could not be inserted into the recurrent cycle of an annual calendar, were the concern of individuals rather than the representatives of the official cult. Segal further suggests that it was precisely the fact of women's involvement on these occasions which

encouraged the silence in our sources.²⁴ We should also remember that many of the mourning rites, inherited as they were from earlier more primitive days, were deemed incompatible with the official religion, ritual and cult of Hellenistic Palestine, and as such were frequently condemned (see, for example, *Lev.* 26:28; *Deut.* 14:1, 18:11; *Ps.* 106:28; *B.S.* 30:18-19; *Jub.* 22:17; *Ep. Jer.* 31:32).

Excluded from all official means of religious expression, women turned to magic – or rather continued the magical tradition which had been theirs in the early period of Hebrew history.²⁵ Although time does not allow us to enter into a discussion here of the magical practices of Hellenistic Palestine, a couple of points should be noted. Firstly, according to our sources, it was especially women who were associated with magic. Thus, for example, the great religious leader Hillel declared on one occasion: 'The more flesh, the more worms . . . the more women, the more witchcrafts' (*Aboth* 2:7), and later Jewish thinkers, when pondering the Bible's specific condemnation of sorceresses rather than sorcerers (*Ex.* 22:17), reasoned that this was 'Because mostly women engage in witchcraft' (*Sanh.* 67a).²⁶ The second point is that women were especially associated with sinister or base magic (hence the references to them as witches and sorceresses), and with simple, superstitious folk practice. They were precluded from activity in the higher, more powerful magical arts, for these required an esoteric knowledge gained through immersion in a mystical lore from which women were barred. Thirdly, many of the magical practices in which women were involved were vigorously opposed and condemned by the religious leaders of the time in consequence of their incompatibility with the true worship of Yahweh (*Lev.* 19:26f.; *Deut.* 18:9-11; *Ezek.* 13:17f.; *B.S.* 34:1-8; *Sanh.* 7:7, 11).²⁷

Overall, therefore, the position of women in Jewish religion, ritual and cult may best be summed up by the Mishnah's constant coupling of women with minors and slaves, and by a statement of Josephus that, in the eyes of the Law, ' . . . the woman . . . is in all things inferior to the man' (*Con. Ap.* II:201). Throughout their lives, women's personal vow of valuation to God was reckoned at roughly half that of men (*Lev.* 27:2f.),²⁸ and it was in the light of these facts that men each morning offered the following prayer of thanksgiving: 'Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a woman.'²⁹

Abbreviations used in the Text

<i>B.B.</i>	Baba Bathra	<i>Midd.</i>	Middoth
<i>Ber.</i>	Berakhoth	<i>Naz.</i>	Nazir
<i>Bikk.</i>	Bikkurim	<i>Ned.</i>	Nedarim
<i>Erub.</i>	Erubin	<i>Pes.</i>	Pesahim
<i>Hag.</i>	Hagigah	<i>R.H.</i>	Rosh ha-Shanah
<i>Hall.</i>	Hallah	<i>Sanh.</i>	Sanhedrin
<i>Kel.</i>	Kelim	<i>Shabb.</i>	Shabbath
<i>Ket.</i>	Ketuboth	<i>Sot.</i>	Sotah
<i>Kidd.</i>	Kiddushin	<i>Sukk.</i>	Sukkah
<i>Makk.</i>	Makkoth	<i>Tos.</i>	Tosefta
<i>Meg.</i>	Megillah	<i>v.</i>	Jerusalem Talmud
<i>Men.</i>	Menahoth		

Notes

1. Women acting in public capacities: Astour (1966), pp. 185-96; Brooks (1941), pp. 227-53; Peritz (1898), pp. 111-47 (though this article goes somewhat overboard in assuming a total involvement for women at all levels of religion and cult).
2. For these various developments, see Segal (1979), pp. 121-37.
3. These ideas are to be seen especially in the writings of Deutero-Isaiah (*Is.* 34-35, 40-55, parts of 56-66). For the effect of the exile on Jewish life and thought, see conveniently Bright (1960), pp. 323-55.
4. For the equation by the legislators of ritual cleanness with holiness, see Neusner (1973), pp. 18f.
5. The Priestly Code also itemised certain states of male impurity (*Lev.* 15:2f.). These, however, arising as they did from no regular bodily cycle, were not nearly as restrictive or immobilising as those decreed for women.
6. Here one might contrast the descriptions of family life in the early biblical narratives with the last chapter of *Proverbs* (a post-exilic work) which neatly depicts the ordering of a nuclear family. For the move toward monogamy, note the constant coupling of husband and wife, father and mother in the post-exilic writings; for married children leaving their parents, see *Ahikar* 2:45; *B.B.* 6:4; *B.S.* in *B.B.* 98b; for the disappearance of concubinage and the levirate (the obligation of marriage with the widow of a childless brother, the eldest son of the union succeeding to the deceased's estate), see Epstein (1942).
7. Thus the rabbis characterised God as the one 'who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us' (*Tos. Ber.* 7:9), and declared that 'a man performs ten precepts before ever he eats a piece of bread' (*v. Hall.* 58a).
8. For details of the domination of Jewish life by the commandments, see Urbach (1975), pp. 315f.
9. On the importance of education in the lives of the Jewish people, see, e.g., *Ber.* 47b; *Men.* 110a; *B.B.* 12a; especially *Kidd.* 1:10: 'He that has no knowledge of Scripture and Mishnah . . . has no part in the habitable world.' For women's exemption, *Kidd.* 29b; cf. *Naz.* 29a; *Erub.* 27a. Contrast *Kidd.* 1:10 with 'Better

to burn the Torah than to teach it to women' (*y. Sor.* 3:4).

10. The rabbis found scriptural authority for the view that women were intellectually incapable of coping with the demands of an education in Torah and should instead concentrate upon household affairs: 'There is no wisdom in woman except with the distaff. Thus also does Scripture say: "And all the women that were wise-hearted did spin with their hands" (*Ex.* 35:25)' (*Yoma* 66b). On the incorrectly held assumption that Beruriah was a woman of learning (and that thus other women possessed educational opportunities), see Goodblatt (1977).

11. For details of the offerings made at the Temple, see *Lev.* 1:3ff. and Barton (1927), pp. 79-89.

12. For a description of the lifestyle of the nazirites and of the reasons for their decline, see Robertson Smith (1894), pp. 324f., 482; Fohrer (1973), pp. 153-4; Bonsirven (1931), p. 188. We should also note that even if a woman did decide to become a nazirite, her husband had the right to revoke her vow (*Num.* 30:3f.; *Naz.* 4:1-5, 9:1; *Ned.* 1:9).

13. A further reflection of the non-status of the female in the Temple cult is to be seen in the exilic legislators' specification that all important sacrifices be of male victims (*Lev.* 1:3f.). According to Philo, the reason for this rule was because 'the male is more complete, more dominant than the female, closer akin to causal activity, for the female is incomplete and in subjection and belongs to the category of the passive rather than the active' (*Spec. Leg.* I.198f.).

14. For a survey of the evidence available, see Hollis (1934).

15. See, for example, Finkelstein (1930), pp. 49-59; Gutman (1981); Morgenstern (1956), pp. 192-201; Zeitlin (1931) (all of differing opinions).

16. Note that the rabbinic definition of what constituted a town (as opposed to a village) was a community in which there lived ten unoccupied men (who could be counted on to form a quorum) (*Meg.* 1:3).

17. Loewe (1966), pp. 44-5.

18. See Epstein (1948).

19. Avi-Yonah (1975), I, p. 187.

20. Sukenik (1932), pp. 15f.

21. Sukenik (1935), p. 72.

22. See S. Gutman *et al.*, 'Excavations in the Synagogue at Horvat Susiya', in Levine (1981), p. 124, and Seager (1975) (contains material on Galilean synagogues). Z. Ma'oz remarks: 'The view that synagogues of this period did not contain a women's gallery is supported by the synagogue at Gamla where no traces of any separation are found' (Levine, 1975, p. 39). We might also note that the excavators of Capernaum, which was once thought to have stairs appropriate for a gallery, are now convinced that there was no gallery (*ibid.*, 100).

23. Abrahams (1932), pp. 39-40.

24. Segal (1976), pp. 2, 5.

25. Trachtenberg (1961), part I.

26. The Mishnah records the fact that Simeon ben Shetah had 80 women from Ashkelon hanged in one day (*Sanh.* 6:4). According to the Jerusalem Talmud these women were witches (*y. Hag.* 2:2, 77d; *Sanh.* 6:9, 23c).

27. Significantly, the Priestly Code's prohibitions on magical practices appears together with the ban on prostitution and mourning rites (*Lev.* 19:26f. cf. *Nahum* 3:4).

28. Regarding this differentiation, Philo wrote: 'the Law laid down a scale of valuation in which no regard is paid to beauty or stature of anything of the kind, but all are assessed equally, the sole distinction being between men and women, and between children and adults' (*Spec. Leg.* II.32).

29. The use of this blessing may first have been authorised in the second

century AD, either by R. Meir or Judah. Possibly something of the sort was known to St Paul (*Gal.* 3:28). See Loewe (1966), p. 43.

Further Reading

- J. Jeremias (1969), *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Appendix: 'The Social Position of Women', London
- S. Safrai (1976), 'Religion in everyday life', 'The Temple', 'The Synagogue', in S. Safrai and M. Stern (eds.), *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, Amsterdam, sect. 1, vol. II, 793-833; 865-907; 908-44
- (1969), 'Was there a women's gallery in the synagogue of antiquity?', *Tarbiz* 23, 329-38 (in Hebrew, English summary p. 11)
- R. de Vaux (1961), *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions*, tr. J. McHugh, London