Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology: Recovering the Roots of Liberation

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Christian feminist theologians, working to recover the voices of women and de-construct the androcentricism that has so thoroughly shaped Christianity, turn often to the person of Jesus, looking to his practices and those of his earliest movement in an effort to recover liberative tendencies stifled by centuries of patriarchy. In the process, however, feminist theologians have often unwittingly fallen into the trap of anti-Judaism, portraying Jesus as standing against his Jewish tradition rather than in continuity with it. So eager to portray Jesus as the liberator of women, Christian feminist theology has pitted Christianity against Judaism in such a way as to devalue the latter. Jewish feminist theologians, themselves working to recover the voices of women and the liberative tendencies inherent in Judaism, have repeatedly pointed out this exchange of one kind of denigration for another. Such a juxtaposition of early Jewish sexism against early Christian feminist, however, is not merely anti-Jewish, it is inauthentic and misrepresentative of historical evidence.

That Judaism, as well as even the earliest christianities, were patriarchal in expression should not be denied. Such bias is unsurprising given the social, cultural and legal position of women in the Greco-Roman world, a position of subordination that undoubtedly influenced the development of ancient Judaism and ancient Christianity. Yet, as Christian feminist theologians point out, within the early Jesus movement and even early Christianity, a spirit of liberation and egalitarianism was persistent, even in the face of cultural influence and assimilation. In the attempt to reveal the liberative tendencies present in the gospels and the early Church, however, Christian feminist theologians often turn to Judaism, emphasizing the patriarchal elements of the early Jewish tradition as a foil against which to reveal the egalitarian nature inherent in Christianity. This approach fails to recognize first the presence of liberative tendencies within early Judaism, which, in its variegated and nascent form, was not one monolithic entity capable

of being equated with the rabbinic writings but rather incorporated numerous Jewish sects and renewal movements that most certainly contained egalitarian impulses. Secondly, such an approach disregards the Jewishness of Jesus, who drew upon his religious tradition in his treatment of women and worked within Judaism rather than against it. A closer examination of ancient Judaism and women's place within it as well as Jesus' conformity to his religious tradition and the Jewish character of the earliest Jesus movement not only helps in contextualizing Jesus for Christians but also reveals the inauthenticity of using anti-Judaism to promote Christian feminist theology.

This paper will examine the complexity of ancient Judaism and the early Jesus movement in an effort to recover the liberative tendencies inherent in the Jewish tradition as a means of understanding more fully the view of women presented in Jesus and the early Jesus movement. After explicating the problem of Christian feminist anti-Judaism, the place of women in the Greco-Roman world will be explored as well as the role of women in Second Temple Judaism. The person of Jesus, his religious tradition, and its importance in understanding Jesus' message and treatment of women will then be examined. Finally, a portrait of the early Jesus movement as one of many within early Judaism will be drawn in an effort to understand more fully the importance of Judaism for comprehending early Christian attitudes towards women.

The Problem of Christian Feminist Anti-Judaism

Christianity has a long history of anti-Judaism and, together with the power imbalance that privileges the Christian over the Jewish, often cannot even perceive its own perpetuation of exploitative attitudes. It is Jewish theologians, specifically Jewish feminist theologians, who have confronted Christian feminist scholarship with its own role in perpetuating anti-Jewish sentiments in the name of female liberation. Just as Christian theology has in the past defined

itself over and against Judaism, at the expense of Judaism, Christian feminism often falls into the trap of pitting Christianity against Judaism by portraying Judaism in explicitly negative terms, essentially creating a Judaism that will function as a foil for Christian feminist theology. As Jewish theologian Judith Plaskow recognizes, the three major areas in which Christian anti-Judaism is most entrenched and explicit are the contrasting of the Old Testament God with the New Testament God, the blaming of Judaism for the death of the goddess, and the portrayal of Jesus as the feminist who liberates from patriarchal Judaism.[1]

Working from scripture, Christian feminist theologians examine the portrayals of God in Scripture and the influence such images have on reinscribing or subverting the myth of masculine superiority. However, in so doing feminist theology has often contrasted the God of the Hebrew Scriptures against the God of the Christian Scriptures. Christian feminists, looking to reveal the liberative nature of the God revealed by Jesus, characterize the God of Jesus as a God of love, mercy, and inclusivity while portraying the Old Testament God as a God of wrath and vengeance.[2] What some feminist theologians have thus created, then, is "an internal development in the nature of God that amounts to virtual dualism."[3] In essence, the God of the Jewish testament becomes the vengeful, jealous, authoritarian God who seizes power and Jesus, the servant to the poor, becomes the new revelation of a God of compassion, a God of the marginalized. As Plaskow accurately points out, such a construction takes what is a tension within both the Christian and Jewish traditions and turns it into a conflict between the two, a conflict that inevitably works to the detriment of Judaism.[4] However, any reading of the Jewish scriptures reveals a mixed portrait of God. God is both the God of justice and vengeance and the

[1] Judith Plaskow, "Feminist Anti-Judaism and the Christian God," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, No. 2 (Fall 1991), 101. 7, No. 2 (Fall 1991), 101.
[2] Plaskow, 101.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., 102.

God of mercy and compassion. Likewise, God in the New Testament is not simply merciful, but stands ready to condemn the unfaithful.[5] Thus, any feminist argument that sets the Christian God over and against the God of the Old Testament is not merely anti-Jewish, it is misrepresentative of scripture itself.

Alongside creating a negative portrayal of God in the Old Testament, Christian and post-Christian feminist theology has blamed Judaism for the death of the goddess. Many feminists, reflecting on the condemnation of idols so proliferate in the Hebrew Scriptures, portray the denunciation of idolatry in Jewish Scripture to be the cause of the smothering of goddess cults and thus the female image of the divine.[6] Christian scholars conveniently forget the prominent role Christianity played in denouncing and anathematizing goddess worship, preferring instead to "point the finger at problematic aspects of the Christian tradition as they also appear within Judaism than…to deal with them within Christianity itself."[7] While, as Plaskow recognizes, it is true that Judaism contributed to the suppression of the goddess, focusing the blame solely on Judaism without recognizing the Christian contribution and the overarching emergence of male-dominated society and religion in the Ancient Near East that gradually replaced the earth mother goddess with a sky god, obscures the complexities of the development while blaming the Jewish people for another deicide.[8] Although both the pitting of the God of the Jewish testament against the Christian God and the denouncing of Judaism for the death of the goddess fuel anti-Jewish

[5] Ibid., 103. Plaskow cites the passage from Mark 16:16, in which the risen Christ states, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved but he who does not believe will be condemned." God stands ready to save and condemn as in the Jewish Scriptures.

[6] Ibid.,104.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Plaskow, 107. See also, Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 10. Thurston briefly explores the emergence of a monotheistic, patriarchal god with the arrival of nomadic warrior groups. After the introduction of the patriarchal god, patriarchal religions worked to suppress goddess religion from the eighth century B.C. to the seventh century A.D. No single religious tradition, thus, can be blamed for the suppression of the goddess.

sentiments in theology and feminism, it is on the person of Jesus, and the portrayal of Jesus as the feminist over and against his patriarchal religion, that most contributes to anti-Judaism.

As the central symbol of Christianity and the linchpin linking Christianity to Judaism, the interpretation of the person of Jesus plays a major role both in feminist theology and in anti-Judaism. While many feminist theologians remain ambivalent in their articulation of who Jesus is, the fact remains, feminist theologians must articulate an idea of what is special or unique about Jesus. [9] The problem arises when theologians attempt to portray Jesus' uniqueness by contrasting him with his Jewish tradition. As Plaskow states, claiming that Jesus was a feminist "depends on wrenching Jesus out of his Jewish context and depicting the Judaism of his period in unambiguously negative terms."[10] Part of the problem stems from the Christian attempt to reconstruct the Jewish attitude toward women. Often, Christian writers will cite rabbinic literature to document Jewish attitudes towards women without understanding the nature of rabbinic literature. Taking tractates of the Mishnah, that date anywhere from before Christ to five hundred years later, and selecting some passages at the expense of others, Christian scholars sketch a "monolithic Jewish society in the first century CE that was highly "patriarchal," confining women primarily to the domestic realm, with little access to any public life."[11] Such readings distort the nature of Talmudic passages that cannot be taken to define "normative" Judaism at the time of Christ. The Mishnah itself combines elements from Greek culture, Roman law, and Torah, while incorporating the teachings of many different rabbis who were responding to conditions in individual communities.[12] By selectively drawing upon rabbinic literature,

[9] Ibid., 104.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ross Kraemer, "Jewish Women and Christian Origins: Some Caveats," in *Women and Christian Origins* ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36.
[12] Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 93.

focusing wholly on those statements that treat women negatively while dismissing those that are positive, scholars misuse these ancient sources.[13] By reconstructing a "Judaism" that secluded women and marginalized them from religious congregation, Christian scholars then portray Jesus as being an innovator, moving in complete opposition to his Jewish tradition and creating a relationship with women that was radical.[14] As Ross Kraemer argues, "Negative portraits of Jewish women in the first century are thus contrasted with New Testament narratives to buttress claims of Christian superiority."[15] The more patriarchal and oppressive towards women that Judaism is portrayed, the more liberating and free of misogyny Jesus and his early movement become.[16] However, the fact remains that misogyny and patriarchy did not belong solely to one religion over the other but rather were part of the texture of the entire Greco-Roman world. Only by understanding ancient social attitudes towards women that influenced the development of Judaism and Christianity can the treatment of women in both religions thus be understood.

Women in the Greco-Roman World

Late antiquity was the formative period for both Judaism and Christianity. During these early centuries, the laws governing each religion were established which in many cases continue to determine each community today, including the role women would play in the Christian church and Jewish synagogue. Thus, understanding the historical context from which these laws arose contributes to a fuller understanding of the traditions themselves. Yet, ascertaining the historical reality of the lives of women in the first century C.E. is immensely difficult. Not only does the two-thousand year gap between the world of antiquity and modern scholarship pose

[13] Judith Romney Wegner, "Philo's Portrayal of Women—Hebraic or Hellenistic?," in *"Women Like This:" New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 43.

[14] Kraemer, "Jewish Women and Christian Origins," 36.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 42.

immense cultural and hermeneutical difficulties for understanding society but the variety of sources originating anywhere from Palestine to Alexandria to Rome complicates matters even further. When it comes to information pertaining specifically towards women, information is even scarcer. Even in sources that speak of women, specifically literature, one must critically question to what extent such sources accurately portray ancient women.[17] Literary texts are crafted for a purpose and for this reason the possibility exists that portrayals are distorted for literary effect. Likewise, overwhelmingly these texts are written by men and thus portray men's view of women rather than women's account of their own lives.[18]

Another difficulty in re-covering the historical context occurs in the attempt to understand and differentiate between Jewish, Hellenistic, Roman, and Christian views of women. Often, when a claim is made that first-century Christianity improved the treatment of women, the overtly patriarchal statements in the Pauline letters are explained away by attributing them to his Jewish background or Greco-Roman social context.[19] For example, the passages in 1 Corinthians, and in later epistles, that enforce silence upon women are read as an adulteration of the pristine egalitarianism ascribed to Jesus and attributed either to Jewish or societal influences on the early church. Such an argument, however, misses a fundamental point. Differentiating between Jewish attitudes towards women, Hellenistic attitudes toward women, Jesus' attitude towards women, and Christian attitudes towards women is immensely complicated and, given the difficulty of interpreting epigraphical and literary evidence, perhaps not entirely possible in the present. Thus, while it is debated whether Hellenism negatively influenced Judaism or vice versa, one must remember that neither Hellenism nor Judaism were monolithic entities, nor were

[17] Lynn R. LiDonnici, "Women's Religions and Religious Lives in the Greco-Roman City," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 80.

[18] LiDonnici, 81.

[19] Wegner, 44.

they mutually exclusive. There is, then, no single answer to the question of whether Judaism through Christianity influenced the way women were treated in antiquity, or whether Hellenism detrimentally influenced the treatment of women in Judaism.[20]

Furthermore, recent scholarship on Second Temple Judaism and the Hellenism of the time reveals that Judaism was not, as earlier pictured, in conflict with Hellenism. Previously, the relationship between these two groups has been framed either as conflict, in which Judaism turns in upon itself and aims to combat Hellenism, or absorption, in which some Jewish groups eliminate Jewish distinctiveness and embrace Hellenistic practices without reserve. However, as a close reading of ancient Jewish texts reveals, the relationship between Judaism and Hellenism is not nearly so simplistic. Rather, Judaism existed within a cultural context of Hellenism, and thus necessarily remained part and parcel of the Hellenistic world.[21] At the same time, however, Judaism negotiated its Greek world, adopting and adapting elements from Hellenism into its literature and identity while staunchly maintaining Jewish particularism and exclusivity. The same kind of relationship, in which certain cultural attitudes and practices are assimilated while others may be resisted can be seen in the early Christian movement. Thus, in feminist studies, the lines that are often drawn between Jewish women, Christian women, or Hellenistic women are not necessarily accurate.[22] Many early Christian women were both Jewish and Hellenistic as well Christian, making it difficult to distinguish between the subcultural groups.

As part and parcel of Hellenistic society in which they emerged, Christianity and Judaism were inevitably shaped by the cultural influences from which they grew. The society preceding

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[20] Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 8.

[21] Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 32.

[22] Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 9.

the birth of Jesus and through the first century C.E. was patriarchal and hierarchal in nature.[23] The gender anthropology of Aristotle, that women were deformed and misbegotten males, influenced social norms in which the male was the normative and active and the women the passive.[24] In general, the husband was the head of the family and all children, women, and slaves were subordinate to him. This system of *paterfamilias* was the official institution so that any change in male headship required legal proceedings.[25] The majority of women were under the financial control of their father or husband and dependent upon the closest male relative for legal guardianship.[26] Societal roles tended to be drawn along gender lines, with women limited to the domestic sphere, however, in some cases minor fluidity in roles occurred.[27]

Around the third century B.C.E., the development of free marriages occurred. Unlike previously, when the woman became part of her husband's family, she now remained part of her former family even after marriage. This allowed her to retain property and file for divorce.[28] Thus, women achieved some degree of emancipation. While the male head, *paterfamilias*, could dispose of the women's dowry as he saw fit, should the woman divorce him and he be unable to prove her morally at fault, the entire dowry returned to the woman.[29] This relative emancipation allowed some women to develop interests beyond the domestic sphere. However, the institution in which a woman moved from her father's house to her husbands remained, so that the idea of a single woman living alone outside of the home was still largely nonexistent.[30]

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[23] Daniel J. Harrington, *Jesus: A Historical Portrait* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 53.

[24] Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 17.

[25] Ibid., 19.

[26] Contance F. Parvey, "The Theology and Leadership of Women in the New Testament," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 118.

[27] Sawyer, 17.

[28] Ibid., 19.

[29] Ibid., 20.

[30] Ibid., 21.

Upper class women, however, had distinct advantages in a male dominated society. In many cases, they tended to be well-educated. References to the education of women can be found in texts concerning the education of sons. For example, records reveal that Agricola, senator governing most of Britain after its conquest, was educated in the liberal arts by his mother up until adulthood.[31] Similarly, Atia, the mother of Caesar, Aurelia, and Augustus, was responsible for the education of her children. Such education was more than elementary but concerned advanced academic studies, revealing that some women of means were also highly educated.[32] Furthermore, there is historical evidence of women organizing to protest laws in their own behalf. In 195 B.C.E., women organized for a demonstration against the Oppian Law, which had sought to limit the wealth of women whose male relatives had been killed in the Second Punic War. Alongside this slight improvement is women's lives, runs the predictable counter-appeal. Cato thus argues against the repeal of the Oppian Law, stating "What they [women] want is complete freedom—or, not to mince words, complete license. If they carry this present issue by storm, what will they not try next?...Once they have achieved equality, they will be your masters."[33] As some women gained more legal protection, despite never acquiring the right to vote, backlash that spoke unfavorably of women continued to be proliferated. Thus, while "There was evidently a trend toward women's emancipation…it was not met entirely with favor; in fact, it was severely criticized by most popular writers of the time."[34]

Turning to the lower echelon of society, information concerning women becomes even sparser. As education was the responsibility of the family, plebian women received virtually no

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 22.
[33] Sawyer, 23. Translation from J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (London: The Bodley Head, 1962), 34.
[34] Parvey, 119.

formal education.[35] For the majority of lower-class women, life consisted of house work, feeding the family and livestock, and making clothes. Female slaves and freedwomen in the cities also undertook jobs such as hairdressing, prostitution and wet-nursing and raising the children of others.[36] While the Roman world offered some emancipation previously unknown to women, it remained thoroughly patriarchal at its core. Any liberation occurred within the constraints of patriarchy rather than liberation from patriarchy.[37] Thus, the world of emerging Judaism and Christianity was a thoroughly patriarchal one, but one which recognized a trend, however slight, towards more rights for women.

Women in Second Temple Judaism

Understanding the role of women in ancient Judaism is difficult due to the scarcity of information and the diversity of sources from post-exilic works to the Talmud to extant inscriptions on edifices. A brief overview of the religious commandments dictated by Torah reveals the androcentric bias present in Jewish Scriptures. In the commandments, the woman is assumed to be excluded unless specifically mentioned.[38] The male-bias can be seen in the Ten Commandments, which are directed towards Jewish males rather than Jewish women.[39] The commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Exodus 20:17) portrays clearly that wives are not envisioned as the audience but rather their husbands. So too, a covenant ceremony found in Deuteronomy 29:9-11 addresses its audience thusly:

> You stand assembled today, all of you, before the LORD your God—the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp.

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[35] Sawyer, 27.
[36] Ibid., 29.
[37] Ibid., 31.
[38] Ilan, 28.
[39] Cohen, 70.

The "you" being addressed in the passage is the men of Israel, the women are "yours," in other words the property of men.[40] The androcentricism of the Scriptures is maintained in Second Temple Judaism and later rabbinic Judaism, as can be seen in many places in Talmudic literature and the Jewish legal code.

Turning to Talmudic literature, the following points must be kept in mind: first, those responsible for its production derived from the Pharisaic school of the Second Temple Period. Thus, they represent a Pharisaic worldview. Second, the authors and main figures in the literature belong to a socially homogenous group whose main focus was Torah-study.[41] Thus, caution should be exercised in uncritically taking the dictates of rabbinic literature to reveal the historical reality of women at the time of Christ, especially due to the often late date of many of the passages.

In the public sphere, the rabbis' pronunciations in *halakhot* separate labor by specifying women's tasks to be those related to early child-rearing and household tasks.[42] This division of labor is also found in the Christian gospels, often in the parables of women, in which Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a woman who mixes yeast into flour (Matt. 13:33-4). The images of women's labor that abound in the parables are of women working within the home. According to the rabbis, women's tasks are confined to the house as her payment for her husband's maintenance of her, placing full support of the family on the man.[43] Rabbinic piety preached that women's place was in the home. Thus, one passage states: "The women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house…. A woman, then, should not be a busybody, meddling with matters outside her household concerns, but should seek a life of

[40] Cohen, 70.
[41] Ilan, 32.
[42] Ibid., 185.
[43] Ilan, 186.

seclusion. She should not show herself off like a vagrant in the streets before the eyes of other men."[44] Such seclusion might be an ideal from the perspective of the rabbis, however it was common knowledge and practice that there were times and occasions for women to leave the house. Women went to market, visited friends, traveled to Jerusalem on pilgrimage and attended ceremonies in the Temple.[45] Rather, the rabbis desired that women not assert authority in Jewish public life.[46] This relegation of women to the home, notably, does not necessarily reveal anything about the actual relationships between men and women. It may have been the ideal from an androcentric perspective, but epistemological evidence reveals that such was not always the case. For example, in agricultural societies, it was common for the woman to work outside of the home in the fields, so that the division of labor was not exclusively demarcated.[47] Furthermore, skills women practiced in the house could, and did, lead to more public professions. Thus, women did indeed work as shopkeepers, despite the rabbinical ethical evaluation of such a practice as unsuitable.[48] Women also worked as innkeepers, hair dressers, midwives, and professional mourners. Training in midwifery also made a woman suitable to expand her knowledge of anatomy and work as a physician as well. Thus, it was common for Jewish women to work in some professions outside of the home.[49]

As for women's access to and study of the Torah, Jewish law seems to exclude it, stating: "And you shall teach them to your sons' (Deut. 11:19), your sons and not your daughters" (*Sifre Deut*. 46).[50] However the issue was a controversial one, with both sides represented in rabbinic law. For example, one *halakhot* reads: "If a man is forbidden by vow to have any benefit from

[44] Cohen, 72. From Philo, *On the Special Laws* 3.31 §169-71.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ilan, 186.
[48] Ilan, 187.
[49] Ilan, 190.
[50] Ibid., 191. , Quote is taken from L. Finkelstein, *Akiba:Scholar, Saint and Martyr* (New York, 1936), 104. cf. *bQidd*. 30a.

his fellows,…he may teach Scripture to his sons and daughters…"[51] Another states, "Men and women who have suffered a flux, menstruants and women who have given birth [and all of these are ritually unclean] are permitted to read in the *Torah*, the Prophets, and the Writings and to learn *Mishnah*, *midrash*, *halakhah*, and *aggadah*…"[52] Both of these statements, without explicitly addressing whether or not women were permitted to study Torah, assume that women could read and knew the Torah, and the latter one even assumes women had the skills necessary for studying rabbinic literature.[53] Elsewhere in rabbinic literature, that woman could cite the Bible and had expertise over men in areas of *halakhah* pertaining to the home is preserved.[54] Since there was no formal education system for Jewish girls, the learning that they may have received took place in the home. Scripture study was likely quite rare for the majority of lower-class Jewish girls, and confined to the relatively simple book of Genesis.[55] However, some women achieved knowledge and even a fairly high degree of learning in Torah.

The assumed exclusion of women in ancient Judaism has also been linked to the practice of circumcision. Since circumcision is a purely male practice, from which women are excluded, it has been labeled a "male" symbol for inclusion into the Jewish community that is unattainable for women. The result must be, then, that women are not fully integrated into the Jewish people.[56] Yet, such an interpretation, namely that women were not or did not feel like full members, is not self-evident. In the eyes of the community, women were full members and nowhere in Jewish literature are women referred to as uncircumcised, a term frequently

[51] Ibid., 193. She references (*mNed*. 4.2-3).
[52] Ibid., 193. She references *tBer.* 2.12
[53] Ibid., 193.
[54] Ibid., 195-196. In the *Tosefta*, two legal rulings are given by women that deal with the home. Stories told relate women and even a young girl who cite scripture to best a rabbi.
[55] Ibid., 204.
[56] Levine, 72.

employed for non-Jews.[57] Philo of Alexandria, a prominent Jewish-Hellenistic philosopher of the late first century B.C.E. through the early first century C.E., states that there is no need for women to be circumcised. In his view, circumcision is practiced to curb male pride and sexual impulse, something for which women seemingly had no need.[58] However, it must be kept in mind that Philo was a Diaspora Jew born in Alexandria and educated in the Hellenistic style. Philo often integrates Hellenistic philosophy into his articulation of Judaism. Thus, one must be critical of taking his opinion of the importance of circumcision as represented of the norm for all Jews. The fact remains that it is during the Second Temple Period that circumcision becomes a significant marker of Jewish identity.[59] While this practice discriminates between Jew and Gentile, it also discriminates between male and female. According to one interpretation, "Only men are signed by circumcision because only men are obligated and expected to observe all the commandments; only men are full members of the people of God."[60] That circumcision excluded women from the Jewish community appears unlikely, given the place of women within the Jewish legal system and their participation in synagogue; however as a purely male practice it can be seen as reflective of the androcentric bias common to the Ancient Near East.

Two of the greatest Jewish writers in ancient Judaism also reveal the male bias present in some aspects of ancient Judaism. Josephus, in his summary of Judaism, states "A wife, says the Law, is in all things inferior to a husband. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for violent ill-treatment, but that she may be directed; for God has given authority to the husband."[61] Philo similarity maintains the inferior status of women who must be in servitude to their husbands.[62]

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[57] Ibid., 73.
[58] Ibid., 73.
[59] Cohen, 71.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Cohen, 71. From Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.24 § 201.
[62] Ibid., 71. From Philo *Hypothetica* 7.3, in Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 8.7.3.

Such a subordination of women to men can also be found in the texts of Paul and his followers and in many of the Greek and Roman moralists.[63] Women, societally speaking, were inferior to men, to be dominated. However, certain Jewish women can and did wield immense influence in the public realm and rose to positions of prominence within the community, revealing a flexibility within ancient Judaism that is often ignored.

The women of the Hasmonean house, for example, often played a prominent role in the public affairs of the community.[64] Likewise, many Herodian princesses played roles in the public affairs and recent scholarship has expanded knowledge of women bearing leadership roles within Judaism. In her dissertation, Bernadette Brooten analyzes nineteen Greek and Latin inscriptions in which women bear the titles "head of the synagogue," "leader," "elder," "mother of the synagogue," and "priestess," arguing convincingly that women can and did serve as leaders in some synagogues.[65] An inscription on a marble plaque from Smyrna, Ionia thus reads:

> Rufina, a Jewess, head of the synagogue, built this tomb for her freed slaves and the slaves raised in her house. No one else has the right to bury anyone (here). If someone should dare to do so, he or she will pay 1500 denars to the sacred treasury and 1000 denars to the Jewish people. A copy of this inscription has been placed in the (pubic) archives.[66]

The word employed, archisynagōgos, has long been interpreted as an honorary title on the assumption that women could not exercise positions of authority in ancient Judaism. The assumption that these titles merely portray instances of a wife taking on her husband's title,

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 72.
[65] Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptural Evidence and Background Issues* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982).
[66] Ibid., 5. Taken from C11 741; IGR IV 1452.

however, is not supported by the evidence.[67] Nor is the idea that, even if the title were connected to the woman's husband, the woman served no function. There is simply no evidence to support an argument that titles of synagogue leadership were honorific in any period.[68]

Rufina's inscription reveals her status as a wealthy woman, able to establish burial tombs for her freed slaves. The grave, the persons to be buried in it, the legalistic language on the marble plaque, and the high fine for violating the grave speak to the wealth and influence of Rufina.[69] Notably, no husband is mentioned and the deed is drawn up by her, in her name alone. Similarly, the title archisynagōgos is applied to Jairos in Mark 5:22 and Luke 8:49, whose daughter Jesus heals. The function of the archisynagōgos is difficult to ascertain. Luke 13: 10-17 relates a story of Jesus healing a woman on the Sabbath. Following this action, the head of the synagogue instructs the people present that no work is to be done of the Sabbath. This passage, thus, suggests that one possible function of the archisynagōgos is keeping the congregation attentive to the laws of Torah.[70] The Acts of the Apostles (13:15) portrays the heads of the synagogues inviting Paul and Barnabas to speak, indicating some form of leadership role in organizing prayer service.[71] Furthermore, the office of archisynagōgos was held in respect by Jews. In b. Pesah 49b, a catalogue of respected positions, archisynagōgos ranks third, just under scholar and great men of the generation.[72] That women held these positions, even if rarely, is attested in extant ancient inscriptions. As such, these women would have been active in the administration of the synagogue, as well as supporting the congregation in remaining faithful to

[67] Ibid., 9. It is often argued that the women receive these titles on behalf of their husbands. However, as Brooten points out, only twice in these inscriptions are husbands named. Further, "Even if it were to have been the case that the women in these two inscriptions acquired their titles on account of their husbands, which is not a necessary consequence (why should two Jewish leaders not be married to each other?), it does not follow that no functions were attached to the title. Nor does it follow that all women acquired their titles in this way."

[68] Ibid., 10.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Brooten, 16.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., 18-19.

Torah.[73] So too, these women were likely familiar with the Torah and capable of teaching it to others. Thus, as Brooten suggests, "The inscriptural evidence for Jewish women leaders means that one cannot declare it to be a departure from Judaism that early Christian women held leadership positions."[74] Rather, evidence can be cited to reveal women can and did hold leadership roles in Judaism, even if rarely, a practice the early house churches could have maintained.

The question of the place of women during synagogue services is often employed to paint a bleak portrait of Judaism. Women are argued to have been separated from the service in a women's gallery. Surely, such an arrangement would thus limit drastically the role of women in synagogue and the possibility of women holding any significant roles. However, in all of the synagogues that have been excavated in Palestine and in the Diaspora, no actual women's gallery has been found.[75] Even if a side gallery existed, it does not follow that it must have been a women's gallery. Theoretically, "donative inscriptions could speak of a women's gallery, room for women or divider between the women's and men's sections, but none do."[76] Remains found at Masada dating from the first century as well as remains found at Herod the Great's fortress, Herodion, southwest of Bethlehem and Gamla in the Golan Heights reveal no presence of a woman's gallery.[77] Instead, all worshipers would have gathered in one main room. Synagogues from later centuries are conjectured to have women's galleries sometimes based on no evidence and at best based on the presence of a base of a column or several steps.[78] There simply is not

[73] Ibid., 32.
[74] Ibid., 150.
[75] Brooten, 104.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 120.

enough archeological evidence to assert the absolute presence of women's galleries in extant synagogue remains.

Even less is there evidence suggesting that women did not take part in synagogue services or that for them to do so was in any sense extraordinary. Instead, women's participation in synagogue is taken for granted in the ancient sources. One need simply turn to the New Testament itself to witness the unexceptional presence of women. In Luke 13:10-17, Jesus is said to be teaching at a synagogue when a crippled woman appeared. The text does not note this as anything unusual but rather focuses on the head of the synagogue's displeasure over healing on the Sabbath. Likewise, the Acts of the Apostles mentions the presence of women at synagogue multiple times. In Acts 16:11-15, Paul and Silas arrive in Philippi and seek out a synagogue.[79] There Lydia, a worshipper of God, hears their words and invites them to her home. Acts 17:4 portrays Paul and Silas preaching at a synagogue in Thessalonica where he persuades "not a few of the leading women." Lastly, in Acts 18:26, Apollos, a Jew, preaches the Way of the Lord. The texts states, "He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila hear him, they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately" (Acts: 18:26). Thus, not only are women regular attendants of synagogue, it is also attested that some women taught in a synagogue context.[80]

Rabbinic sources also attest the presence of women in synagogue. One source speaks of a male leaving a gentile male to watch over his meat while he is in synagogue. Immediately following, it states, "[An Israelite] woman may set a pot on a stove and let a gentile woman then come and stir it pending her return from the bathhouse or the synagogue, and she need take no

[79] Ibid., 139. Brooten notes that scholarship has a tendency to translate the word proseuchē as some form of outdoor prayer meeting rather than as synagogue as it is generally translated based partly on the fact that women are present, which scholars have assumed would discount the possibility of its nature as synagogue (139-140).

[80] Brooten, 140.

notice of it."[81] The recognition that women go to synagogue and its pairing with the recognition that men go to synagogue implies that women's presence in service is pre-supposed. From sources such as the *baraitha* mentioned above, it is certain that women in the Second Temple period and in the time of the Mishnah and Talmud attended synagogue.[82] In some records, women participated and even had prominent roles in synagogue.

That Judaism was attractive to women can be seen in the practices of conversion and martyrdom, in which women are amply represented. Many of the converts to Judaism during the Second Temple period were women, either through full conversion or through being sympathizers or God-fearers.[83] Josephus writes that almost all of the women of Damascus had "become converts to the Jewish religion."[84] Josephus also mentions the conversion of King Izates of Adiabene's mother, Helena, to Judaism as well as a Roman woman of high rank, Fulvia.[85] Amidst the many references to female proselytes to Judaism, Josephus mentions only one male.[86] Rabbinic literature also attests to the presence of female proselytes and one of the laws from the Theodosian Code explicitly reveals that women continued to be attracted to Judaism well into the Christian era.[87] The law punishes with death any Jews that undertake missionary-type work among Christian women. Had this not been a problem, it is unlikely that such a law with such an extreme punishment would have been necessary. Thus, it is plausible that even Christian women had converted to Judaism.[88] The attraction of women to ancient Judaism forces the question of why. What about the nature of Judaism attracted women

[81] Ibid. She translates B. Abod. Zar 38a-38b.
[82] Ibid., 141.
[83] Cohen, 73.
[84] Brooten, 145. Quote is from Josephus's *Jewish War* 2.20.2 § 560.
[85] Brooten, 145.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid., 146.
[88] Ibid.

specifically? It is possible that some forms of Judaism were less restrictive to women than is often supposed.

On the edge of society, numerous pietist groups "afforded women an outlet for spiritual aspirations that could not normally be fulfilled in the general culture."[89] This reality can be seen in the attraction of women to the Jesus movement as well as to other Jewish and Greco-Roman groups. One example of such a group is the Jewish pietistic and ascetical group the *Therapeutae,* who lived in Egypt and studied, prayed and ate together.[90] Most of the information available on the *Therapeutae* comes from Philo, causing scholars to debate how much of his portrait is historical verses idealistic. However, as Philo describes them, the *Therapeutae* consisted of men and women, most of them freely chosen aged virgins. The group came together for a formal meal, of which men and women sat apart and then formed two choirs and sang hymns to God together.[91] The *Therapeutae,* then, represent one group among many that, outside of mainstream Judaism, gave women an outlet for their spiritual and social yearnings.[92]

The portrait that emerges of women in Second Temple Judaism, then, is complicated and mixed. While Judaism was patriarchal and androcentric like its surrounding culture, women can and did have a place within it. The evidence suggests that Judaism cannot be overtly colored as wholly restrictive and antithetical to women. Rather, women thrived in Judaism, attending synagogue and even maintaining positions of prominence within it. Some marginal Jewish groups offered to women the means to fill spiritual needs, resulting in conversions to the Jewish faith. Some of these attitudes towards women, then, surely influenced Jesus, who drew upon his Jewish tradition to articulate his vision of the kingdom of God.

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[89] Cohen, 73.
[90] Ibid., 74.
[91] Cohen, 74.
[92] Ibid.

Jesus the Jew

Contrasting Jesus against Judaism, as has occurred in Christian feminist theology, completely ignores the fact that Jesus was a Jew, shaped by and working within the Jewish tradition. Instead of treating Jesus as a Jew who broke with Judaism, Christian feminists must acknowledge Jesus' Jewishness and recognize that the movement that formed around him was originally a Jewish movement. As such, Jesus' attitudes toward women cannot be seen as a break with or victory over the patriarchy of Judaism. For example, Jesus' actions could also be interpreted as evidence for the practices of first century Jewish men rather than evidence against it.[93] Taking Jesus' Jewishness seriously suggests the possibility of diverse liberative strands within early Judaism.[94] Still, anti-Judaism appears to be so ingrained in Christian theology that when Christian feminists articulate the uniqueness of Jesus and his relationships with women, anti-Jewish biases continue to emerge. Recognizing and taking seriously Jesus' Jewishness in no way undermines Christian theological claims.[95] As Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine illustrates, "Jesus does not have to be fully unique in order to say or do something meaningful."[96] Instead, Christian feminist theologians must seek to understand Jesus in relationship with his tradition and articulate his significance in such a way that does not negate the influence Judaism had on his liberative practices.[97]

An examination of Jesus' interactions with women recounted in the gospels reveals that his behavior is actually fairly consistent with that which is found in rabbinic literature.[98] In twelve passages in the gospels, Jesus speaks directly to women. In each of these episodes, Jesus'

[93] Kraemer, "Jewish Women and Christian Origins," 39.
[94] Plaskow, 105.
[95] Levine, 51.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Plaskow, 106.
[98] Kraemer, "Jewish Women and Christian Origins," 39.

conversations are short and do not deviate with the rabbinic idea of limited speech with women, specifically married women.[99] For example, in the story of the healing of the hemorrhaging women found in all three synoptic gospels, Jesus merely states, "Daughter, your faith has saved you" (Mk 5.34, Matt 9:22, Lk 8:48). Even when a more significant exchange seems to occur, Jesus still rarely speaks more than a few words to women. In the exchange with Mary and Martha of Bethany, Mary sits quietly and listens to Jesus teach while Martha does housework. When Martha complains, Jesus simply praises Mary's choice, ending the dialogue in one exchange.[100] The lengthiest exchange, between Jesus and the Samaritan women in John 4:7-30, is the only example of an extended dialogue between Jesus and a woman.[101]

Of these women who are engaged by Jesus, two are non-Jewish and none of them are married. In fact, in the entire gospel corpus, only one female follower of Jesus other than the mother of Jesus is portrayed as married, namely Joanna, the wife of Chuza.[102] Thus, "nothing Jesus does in the canonical gospels may actually be seen to conflict with…putative rabbinic restrictions."[103] Jesus speaks to no married women, even his own mother has no mention of a husband after the birth narratives, suggesting she may have been a widow. His encounters with women alone, then, should not be seen as entirely against the attitudes of his Jewish tradition. Since men and women mixed freely to an extent in Israel, as the presence of women in society and synagogue found in the gospels and elsewhere attests, Jesus' actions are not radically new.[104] Yes, Jesus displayed liberal attitudes toward women that were more inclusive than the general societal and religious trends, and this should not be negated. Yet, Jesus' treatment towards

[99] Ibid., 40.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid., 41.
[104] Von Kellenbach, 60.

women cannot be described as an opposition to patriarchy and gender dualism as such. Jesus' support of women in leadership roles (MK 16:1-10), opposition to double-standards and marital abuse (Mk 10:2-10), and the creation of an egalitarian and inclusive community should not be viewed as in opposition to his Jewish tradition, but rather as an expression of it.[105]

The Jesus Movement

As Bernadette Brooten has argued, Christianity is not the antithesis of Judaism but an offshoot, and every innovation in it has Judaism as its source.[106] When scholars refer to the Jewish background of Jesus and the early Jesus movement, a common misconception can occur. Such language suggests that Jesus' Jewishness was not integral to his life and thought but rather something against which to contrast him. This approach can then scholars to describe Jesus and his early movement as against Jewish tradition rather than as an expression of it.[107] Such a historical reconstruction tends to fuel anti-Judaism by emphasizing, falsely, the separation of Christianity from Judaism and the rejection of the Jesus movement's roots in Judaism.[108] Rather, Christian feminists can ground their identity in the emancipatory struggles for God's kingdom that was the Jesus movement rather than in a portrait of Jesus as a revolutionary feminist breaking from patriarchal Judaism. In so doing, it must be recognized that the Jesus movement, at its earliest beginnings, was a Jewish emancipatory movement of women and men. As such, many of Jesus' first followers were Jewish women. The movement itself was probably one of several early Jewish movements that sought to liberate Israel from imperial exploitation.[109] Likewise, the emerging Jesus movement probably saw itself as a prophetic movement of Sophia,

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[105] Ibid.
[106] Ilan, 13.
[107] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 104.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, (New York: Continuum, 1995), 90.

within the Jewish tradition of prophets. Such emancipatory movements were not an innovation of Jesus or an anomaly on the historical radar. Rather, such movements are firmly rooted in Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures.[110] Thus, Jesus cannot be conceptualized as over and against Judaism, but rather as standing against the patriarchal structures of domination characteristic of antiquity. Furthermore, the Jesus movement is not a renewal movement in the sense that it supersedes or improves upon Judaism. Nor was the Jesus movement the only Jewish renewal movement in first century Palestine, making it exceptional. Instead, it was one of several emancipatory prophetic movements.

At the center of this Jewish movement is the *basileia tou theo*, a Jewish religious-political vision that seeks freedom from domination.[111] The Jesus movement, like other first century Jewish movements, sought freedom from imperial domination. The Roman system oppressed and exploited not only women but Jews and marginal men. It was because the *basileia* had political overtones that Jesus was crucified. Because the central message of the Jesus movement, liberation from domination, was politically subversive, the body politic killed him; it was not because of his religious teachings.[112] Pronouncing the *basileia* or Kingdom of God as the alternative to Rome and seeking the freedom of the people of Israel, the Jesus movement practiced inclusivity, attracting the marginalized.[113] As a Jewish movement, it originally attracted individuals among the Jews, proclaiming a Jewish message of hope in the liberation of the people and the establishment of God's kingdom. It is within this thoroughly liberating and Jewish message that Christian feminist theology can ground its identity.

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[110] Ibid., 91.
[111] Schüssler Fiorenza, 92.
[112] Ibid., 93.
[113] Ibid..

The shift from the juxtaposition of Christianity verses Judaism that leads to feminist reproduction of Christian anti-Judaism to a reconstruction of the Jesus movement as a Jewish emancipatory movement centered on the *basileia* provides a different frame of reference in which it is possible to avoid reinscribing anti-Jewish attitudes.[114] By focusing on the movement as a Jewish movement and retaining Jesus' Jewishness, such an interpretive move can avoid setting Jesus against Judaism. At the center of Christian feminist theology, then, is not the triumph that Jesus brings over Jewish patriarchy but rather the emancipatory message proclaimed by Jesus and taken up by his Jewish disciples. However, even the Jesus movement was not pure of patriarchal influences and conflicts inevitably arose between the message of the *basileia* and the socio-cultural norm of male domination. Just as Judaism cannot be blamed for patriarchy, the Jesus movement and its early movement that grew into Christianity cannot be unambiguously portrayed as standing in opposition to patriarchy. Feminist theology, both Christian and Jewish, must continually return to the subversive *basileia* which seeks to free all from oppression.

Conclusion

As Jewish scholars continually point out, Christianity, rooted in the Jewish tradition, needs Judaism in a way that Judaism does not need Christianity.[115] As the religious traditions that have exercised power over Judaism for centuries, Christian hermeneutical frameworks often lend themselves to anti-Judaism as much as to androcentricism. Thus, Christian feminist theology must constantly be aware of the power imbalance and work under constant self-critique in order to create a liberative Christianity that does not function to oppress Judaism. One way of achieving this strong emancipatory character without misrepresenting Jesus and devaluing Judaism is to move the focus to one that takes into account the Jewishness of Jesus and the

[114] Ibid., 96.
[115] Plaskow, 101.

movement that gathered around him as well as the historical-social influences that shaped the nature and expression of early Judaism and the Jesus movement. As such, Jesus is not juxtaposed with Judaism but situated within it. Nor does Jesus become the innovator, introducing ideas foreign not simply to Judaism but to the entire ancient world. Rather, Jesus retains the emancipatory thrust essential to Christian feminist theology while recognizing it as an expression of Judaism as well as Christianity. Such a shift can work to bring Christian and Jewish feminist theology into greater and much needed dialogue, for Christian feminists must rely on their Jewish sisters in understanding ancient Judaism and rabbinic literature. Likewise, Christian feminist theologians must constantly critique their research, working to eliminate any anti-Jewish sentiments that are inauthentic to feminist theology and Christianity as a whole. Only then can the true goal of feminist theology—the end of all oppressive systems that devalue the human being, from sexism to racism to anti-Judaism—be achieved.

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