JEWISH WOMEN'S HISTORY IN THE ROMAN PERIOD: A TASK FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Bernadette J. Brooten
Harvard Divinity School

As a teacher, as a scholar, as a dean, and as a churchman, Krister Stendahl has worked for decades to further Jewish-Christian relations and to promote women's studies and women. It is out of gratitude to him that I present these theses, which I see as a continuation of his work.

The Task

1. Writing the history of Jewish women in the Roman period is an urgent task for Christian theology. By recognizing and working with ambivalence within our tradition, we can lay the groundwork for a society based on the dignity and equality of all human beings. Much of past and present Christian theology has not proceeded from the dignity and equality of all human beings. For example, Christian men have often drawn upon Christian theology to support the subjugation of Jews, of other non-Christians, and of Christian women. Both at the level of religious motif—Jews as Christ-killers, women as daughters of the seductress Eve, and at the systemic level of theological reflection—salvation through Christ alone, the masculine as more spiritual than the feminine—Christian theology has often supported the religious and civic subordination of Jews, heathens, and Christian women to Christian men. Anti-Judaism, anti-paganism, and anti-feminism still live on in the Christian churches.

The Prevailing Approach

2. A prevalent view among church people and Christians theologians is that Jewish women in the first centuries CE were more oppressed than early Christian women. I believe that Christian feminists who are in anguish at how deeply rooted within Christianity female subordination is find hope in the possibility that its roots might actually lie else-
where.\(^1\) I further believe that many Christian men wish to create equality within Christianity for women and to enable women to remain within the church. Seeing Jesus and the early church as revolutionary in their attitudes towards women allows such men to call for changes within the church today without departing from the authority of scripture.\(^2\)

**Difficulties with the Prevailing Approach**

3. **Historically**, the comparative situation of women in ancient Judaism and in early Christianity is very unclear. For example, some argue that the church should not take Jesus’ strict prohibition of divorce (Matt 5:31–32; 19:9; Mark 10:11–12; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor 7:10–11) literally, because the prohibition is actually progress for women when compared with ancient Jewish divorce practice.\(^3\) Or one might argue that the command to women to be silent in the church (1 Cor 14:34) need no longer apply today because cultural, especially Jewish constraints were what gave rise to the prohibition.\(^4\) Such arguments are on shaky ground historically.

4. **Theologically**, such arguments represent an avoidance of thorny theological questions: What does a Christian do who disagrees with an

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\(^1\) See Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, *Jesus and the Freed Woman* (New York: Paulist, 1978); Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Women, Men and the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977); Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, *Jesus According to a Woman* (New York: Paulist, 1975); Alicia Craig Faxon, *Women and Jesus* (Philadelphia: United Church, 1973). On this and the following points I have not attempted to give exhaustive references, but rather only examples.


undisputed saying of Jesus (e.g., on divorce)? How can one maintain a traditionally understood authority of scripture after discovering female subordination at all levels of the NT tradition (undisputed letters of Paul, deuto-Pauline letters, possible interpolations, etc.)? How does Judaism’s bearing the burden for Christian female subordination differ from more traditional Christian anti-Jewish arguments?

5. Many theologians have distinguished between the time-bound, culture-bound precepts of the NT and its eternal message. For example, James Crouch has argued that Christians today need not follow literally the command in Colossians that wives and slaves be subordinate (Col 3:18–4:1), because our society—unlike that of the first century—does not demand the subordination of women and slaves. For Crouch, the timeless message is: “The Haustafel calls one, therefore, to give oneself to one’s neighbor within the limitations which the social order places on the relationship.” 5 This schema of time-bound precepts versus an eternal message requires a particular historical reconstruction. One must assume that the NT writers were, in essence, forced by their culture to make statements which in our culture they would not have made. In order to uphold this assumption, one must assume or establish: (1) a radical dissimilarity between the two cultures, and (2) that the principal in question enjoyed universal or at least general acceptance in the cultural environment of the NT (i.e., that female subordination was an unquestioned societal norm).

6. The distinction between time-bound and eternal causes within NT historical research focuses on evidence for female subordination in antiquity. For example, evidence for female non-subordination in the first-century Mediterranean world in general or in Judaism in particular undercuts the theory of female subordination as a cultural necessity. In the course of time NT scholars have recognized the diversity of female experience in the non-Jewish Greco-Roman world. 6 The category

5 James E. Crouch, The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel (FRLANT 109; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972) 160. Ronald W. Graham notes how scholars have explained and defended Paul: “A distinction can and should be drawn between what is of the everlasting order of things, e.g., ‘male and female’ (Gal. 3:28) and what is the product of history and therefore, given time, can and should be changed, e.g., ‘wives, be subject to your husbands’ (Col. 3:18)” (“Women in the Pauline Churches,” 34).

6 Robert Jewett proposes as possible influences on the sexual liberation of Paul (1) Roman influence, given the relative freedom and emancipation of Roman women; (2) the Apostolic Conference with its move away from the Jewish Law; (3) an androgyny campaign in Corinth during the time of the Corinthian correspondence (“Sexual Liberation of Paul,” 75–76).
“time-bound” becomes especially problematic in the face of a similar diversity within Judaism. If women in the Judaism of this period were not only powerless, but also leaders, not only legally disadvantaged, but also in enjoyment of certain rights, then it is no longer clear why a NT writer had to call upon women to be subordinate to their husbands or to be silent.

7. Much of the work on Jewish women at the time of Jesus is currently being done by Christians who wish to learn more about the background of the NT. It is usual to compare the respective positions of women in Judaism and in early Christianity, focusing especially on Jesus’ attitudes towards women or Paul’s statements on women. This manner of comparison and its results are historically questionable. The category “position,” similar to the categories “status” and “role,” do not allow for the variety of Jewish women’s experience. Using Judaism as a background often means foreshortening and oversimplifying. Further, before meaningful comparisons can be drawn, many more detailed historical studies of Jewish and Christian women’s lives and of cultural understandings of the female in this period need to be written.

8. It is now known that women were missionaries and prophets in some early Christian communities, and that some early Christian women were writers. In Judaism, some women served as leaders in

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the ancient synagogue, and some Jewish women were well educated. How can one compare these women and their respective positions within their communities?

Or how can one compare and weigh Jewish and Christian misogynist statements? Is it the quantity that counts? The vindictiveness or vehemence? The system of thought behind the individual statements? No clear methods of comparison are currently in use.

9. The relative status of women is the subject of much comparison, but not that of such other societal groups as men, children, slaves, day laborers, or non-Jews/non-Christians. A history of the comparative work on women in ancient Judaism and women in early Christianity is required. I posit that in this country it began, or perhaps increased in momentum, when nineteenth-century women’s rights advocates began criticizing Christianity more vocally. That is, I suggest that Christians usually employ the comparison to defend Christianity.

10. Seeing Judaism as a primary source of Christian women’s oppression has been present in U.S.-American feminist thought since at least Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Woman’s Bible*. Today, Christian feminists are faced with the dilemma of sexism within the very roots of Christianity, the New Testament. Judith Plaskow has insightfully spoken of projection onto “the Other” of that which we cannot acknowledge in ourselves. She writes:

Feminist research projects onto Judaism the failure of the Christian tradition unambiguously to renounce sexism. ... This is the real motive behind biased presentations of Jesus’ Jewish background: to allow the feminist to present the “true” Christian tradition as uniquely free from sexism.

Differentiated, detailed historical research on women’s history and on understandings of the female in both Judaism and Christianity is the first step towards acknowledging and working with the ambiguity in our religious tradition.

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New Ways of Proceeding

11. One must distinguish between the history of Jewish women and the history of Jewish men’s attitudes towards women. Not distinguishing leads to applying such attitudinal categories as “positive” and “negative” to historical phenomena. “Positive” and “negative” are inadequate for describing such complex phenomena as Jewish women’s religious and community activities, their economic situations, their daily lives, their beliefs and their struggles. One might add that studying attitudes, such as Philonic or rabbinic thinking about women or about the feminine, also requires more sophisticated categories.

12. To study Jewish history not only as background to Christian history, but also as an alternative to it, can lead to a deeper understanding of both.15 Judaism and Christianity were both thriving religious movements in the Roman and early Byzantine periods, and the evidence for female conversions suggests that women found both religions attractive.16

13. Studying Judaism and Christianity as alternatives to each other implies developing historical categories, especially periods, appropriate to each. For example, the phrase “Jewish women at the time of Jesus” assumes a Christian frame of reference. It is not false. It is simply no more appropriate to Jewish history than a study of Christian women at the time of Rabbi Judah the Prince would be to Christian history. The historian of Jewish and Christian women must also ask whether the traditional male categories, “Apostolic Age,” “Early Rabbinic Period,” “Patristic Period,” are suited to women’s history.

14. Jewish women can provide insights into Jewish women’s history that others will less easily be able to provide. The work of such historians as Ross Kraemer, Ellen Umansky, Marion Kaplan, Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, or Sonya Michel constitutes significant progress in understanding.17 If possible, a Christian’s descriptions of Jewish

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16 See Brooten, Women Leaders, 144–47. Ross S. Kraemer is currently working on a longer study of this topic. She has presented preliminary results of her research at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Dallas, December 1983 and at the Sixth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Smith College, June 1984.

17 On Ross S. Kraemer, see n. 16. The larger scope of her research is women in Greek-speaking Jewish communities in antiquity. Ellen M. Umansky, Lily Montagu and the Advancement of Liberal Judaism: From Vision to Vocation (Studies in Women and Religion 12; New York: Mellen, 1983); a collection of Montagu’s sermons edited by Umansky is forthcoming; Marion A. Kaplan, The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: The
women's history should not be left to stand alone—in a series of papers, an anthology, a lecture, or lecture series. There should also be at least one paper, lecture, etc. on the topic by a Jewish woman. We should follow the same model for all cross-cultural and interreligious feminist work.

15. Researchers of all backgrounds, both women and men, can contribute to our knowledge of any group in the history of humanity. However, when studying oppressed minorities or oppressed majorities, researchers belonging to the class of the oppressors, historical or present, must be aware of their presuppositions and of how their research results can be used. All historians need to be conscious of how attitudes and experience may influence the understanding of historical documents and artifacts. For example, a Christian scholar will probably have attitudes towards dietary or purity laws which differ from those of a religious Jewish feminist scholar. It might be difficult for a non-Jewish feminist to understand how a first-century Jewish woman may not have seen Paul's advice on Jewish dietary laws to be liberating. Historical writing is best when one's stance on such matters is expressly stated and when scholars from a variety of backgrounds have the opportunity to comment on the same historical source or question.

16. Christians have nearly always employed descriptions of Jewish patriarchy for anti-Jewish purposes. For this reason, non-Jews should be extremely cautious in analyzing patriarchal structures within Judaism. For the moment, in my view, Jewish feminists are the most suitable persons to analyze such structures.\textsuperscript{18}

17. The history of Jewish women implies exploring every avenue of historical knowledge. We need to draw upon all available literary and non-literary sources to understand the religious, cultural, economic, political, and legal aspects of their lives. Archaeology can teach us about women's housing circumstances and daily lives. Inscriptions and


papyri can yield information about life expectancy, birth rates, family arrangements, women in positions of leadership, law as it functioned in practice, women and property ownership, and so on. An especially promising body of material is the Archive of Babata, a group of around 40 documents in Greek, Aramaic, and Nabatean dating to the early second century CE and found near the Dead Sea in 1961. When published they will provide scholars with extensive documentation on the life of this Palestinian Jewish woman and those associated with her. In addition to detailed work with the sources, one needs to place Jewish women’s history of this period within the context of non-Jewish women’s history, as well as of Jewish men’s history.

Questions in Need of Further Study

18. The study of Jewish and Christian women in the Roman period urgently requires greater knowledge of women in other Greco-Roman religions. Because these religions have not survived and do not have advocates from within, one might not see the relevance of studying them for interreligious dialogue. The history of Christianity’s relations with other religions can help us today in developing interreligious understanding. Further, the cavalier use of “neo-pagan” as a charge against feminist theology should inspire us to come to an accurate and thorough understanding of pagan women in the Roman and other periods.

19. Emphasizing the special contributions that Jewish women can make to Jewish women’s history is not to imply an unbroken continuity in Jewish women’s experience. The question of historical continuity is a very difficult one. For example, a twentieth-century Palestinian Muslim woman may live in greater historical continuity with a second-century Palestinian Jewish or Christian woman than does a North American Christian or Jewish woman. Historical lines are so complex that tracing one’s own origins may lead to discovering that other groups are also—or even more properly—the heirs of one’s ancestors. Analyzing our ethnic and racial images of Christians and Jews in antiquity, and


testing these against historical evidence, will lead to greater precision in assessing racial and ethnic, and thereby cultural, continuity or discontinuity between researchers and the subjects and documents studied.

Goals

20. The history of women must be the history of all, not just of white, Christian-born, non-poor, U.S.-American and North European women. Further, Christian theology needs women’s history in order to articulate a theology which takes Christian women’s experience into account and which allows non-Christian women to live their lives fully and in peace. Understanding something of Jewish women’s past can help us to understand and live together with Jewish women in our society today.21 The same is true for the history of women of other religious traditions.