Book Review


Reviewed by Azila Talit Reisenberger.

The power and effect of any text is amplified by the readers’ perception of it. When the readers perceive the text to have authority, either by being attributed to an eminent writer or to the Divine, the effect of the text on the behaviour of the readers and their outlook on life is magnified double-fold.

The Bible is a clear case in point. Societies and cultures that accept the divine authorship of the Bible do not read the Bible as literature, but rather as a code for behaviour. In an article some years ago I called these societies the ‘Extra Biblical World.’ (Reisenberger, 2000). For ‘extra biblical societies’, the events recorded in the Bible are not seen in their historical context; these events are not one-time occurrences but a message of how to conduct their own lives. The fact that extra biblical societies follow the patriarchal biblical narrative as a code of conduct drives any feminist theologian of the Abrahamic traditions to despair. Feminists who want to claim a share in the spiritual teaching of the Bible have tried to play down the misogynist teachings, through emphasising the historical context of biblical records. However this reasoning has been defeated by the notion of the Divine authority of the Bible. Thus Judeo-Christian women who want to attach themselves to the tradition become despondent.

Reading the book *Midrashic Women: Formation of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* by Judith Baskin reinforces this dejection. The book is a study of the feminine in Rabbinic Literature. As one wades through the book the distress of the Jewish Feminist heightens. Despite the fact that rabbinic literature is not monolithic, preserving a variety of competing opinions, as Baskin is at pains to highlight, the concept of female inferiority is at the core of the rabbinical outlook on women.

In the book Baskin shows that the Sages were not oblivious to the detrimental effect that their interpretation had upon women’s lives. They were therefore at pains to show women as “the Other”, or as Baskin calls it: “A separate people”, a term taken from the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 62 a). Jewish feminists who read the book should be warned: even an attempt to see the Rabbinical text in its cultural and historical context cannot alleviate the despair that one feels when reading these texts. Furthermore, it is painful to realize that Rabbinic Literature is an authoritative corpus of text and thus traditional Judaism can be seen as an “Extra Rabbinical World”; in other words, our very lives are affected by it.

The book is divided into 6 chapters, preceded by an ‘Introduction’ and concluded with an ‘Afterword’. Each chapter is autonomous and deals with a particular topic, yet Baskin uses each as a building block which together forms a solid study of the subject.

Chapter one deals with “Distinguishing differences: The Otherness of women…” It introduces rabbinical texts that depict the inherent biological alterity of women and the way in which these texts justify women’s inferior intellectual and spiritual abilities. If chapter one emphasises the exclusion of Jewish women from the covenant by virtue of the ‘organ’ that they lack, chapter two points to the reasons for the inferiority of women. According to the Rabbis, this is found in the nature of female creation and this is the subject of the
Chapter, which is titled: “Constructing Eve: Midrashic Revisions of Human Creation.” As this chapter deals with women’s creation in Genesis 1-3 it includes women’s role as a ‘help-mate’ to their men and the praise of the importance of marriage and progeny. However, Baskin shows that women’s necessary role in marriage does not constitute advocacy for her equality. This issue is the core of chapter three: “Eve’s Curses: Female Disadvantages and Their Justifications.” This chapter demonstrates in a systematic manner, how most voices within rabbinic literature agree that women are best kept away from centers of communal governance, holiness and learning. This chapter comprises painful reading material for modern Jewish women as it shows how women were barred from any equal standing, even if they were “endowed with unusual intellectual gifts, significant economic resources or access to political power” (p.65). She deals with strong women like Emma Shalom, Beruriah and Yalta.

This leads to chapter 4, which delineates to women their approved roles as the Rabbis saw them: “Fruitful vines and silent partners: women as wives…” As the chapter deals with the crucial survival of the nation by procreation, it highlights the tension that existed between men’s desire to dedicate their lives to the study of Torah and the requirement to procreate. It shows that the commandment to procreate is directed towards the men yet these texts underline the imperative role of women in childbearing and nurturing. This leads Baskin to deal with women who could not conceive. In chapter 5: “Why Were the Matriarchs Barren? Resolving the Anomaly of Female Infertility” Baskin deals with halakhic issues of infertile union, as well as grief of childlessness. After enumerating the seven barren wives in the Bible she deals with the power of prayer. The book is completed with the “Rabbinic delineation of the worlds of women” in chapter 6. As the Sages believed that Jewish society functioned best when its female members remained in the domestic domain under the authority of males, it constructed paradigms of women among women (sisters, co-wives, mistresses etc) and chapter 6 deals with these paradigms.

The body of the book is followed by comprehensive Notes, Bibliography, Subject index and Index of primary sources, all of which add significantly to its strength and establish the book as an excellent resource that promotes and aids further research.

Baskin follows the method that we saw in Tal Ilan’s recent studies, (1997, 1999) in which information about specific women and their activities may be retrieved from rabbinic documents. To those familiar with works in this field such as Tal Ilan’s research, Rachel Biale’s Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women’s Issues in Halakhic Sources, Jacob Neusner’s How the Rabbis Liberated Women, and Daniel Boyarin’s Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture, the question that arises is whether Baskin’s book brings either new information, new method or new outlook on the subject. The answer is that not much is new, yet it does not detract from the importance of the book, as her organisation of the material is systematic under the themes that I describe above, a job excellently done. However this division entails repetition, as she uses the same texts several times in various chapters. It seems like the book started as various independent papers that have been stitched together, which means that reading the book as one unit highlights the repetitions; yet it allows studying each chapter as a well-contained unit. Due to the meticulous research, and the excellent organisation of the material I am going to prescribe independent chapters to my students.

In reading Baskin’s book, it is painful to see how women are defined by their bodies and by bodily functions, as objects of temptation and a source of pollution, rather than as whole and holy human beings. The book makes clear that patriarchy was not unique or original to rabbinic social policy, but as Jewish women who belong to the ‘Extra Rabbinical world’ it drives home the understanding that our status is not
going to change as long as these rabbinic texts are believed to have authority. Even if some of these sources are not considered divine they still possess authoritative power by virtue of Sages’ authorship.

To say that I enjoyed Baskin’s book would be misnomer, as it is painful to realise that little change will take place in Jewish women’s status precisely because of these texts. Nevertheless, I strongly recommend it to anyone who wants to learn about the formation of the feminine in Rabbinic Literature. It is a thorough and methodical study.

References


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