Book Review


Reviewed by Deborah Kahn-Harris

How can one fail to like a book that attempts to coin the phrase “ethnic-political hairdos” (pg. 142)? The phrase may not roll off the tongue and I do not suspect that it will catch on, but its sentiment is fascinating as is the book in which it appears, Cynthia M. Baker’s *Rebuilding the House of Israel: Architectures of Gender in Jewish Antiquity*.

Baker’s book is a fine contribution to growing list of books that deal with gender in rabbinic texts. In *Rebuilding the House of Israel* Baker sets herself a clear and boundaried task – to look at the arenas of bayit, shuk and hatzer and maboi (house, marketplace and courtyard and alleyway) as they intersect with women in Tannaitic literature. Baker’s rabbinic sources are, therefore, Mishnah, Talmud and Tosefta but as she deals directly with issues of space, her sources also encompass the archeological record of this period. As one schooled in the traditional seminary approach to reading Talmud, I found engaging with archaeology and its impact on reading and understanding rabbinic materials a great eye-opener. Indeed, to find an author so adept and skilled at handling the three-fold areas of Rabbinics, archaeology and gender was, for academic writing, quite thrilling.

Baker’s central premise lies in the idea that for too long both traditional scholars of Rabbinics as well as archaeologists have had their own preconceived ideas and agendas regarding women. As she writes, “theories positing dichotomies of public/male speak versus private/female space lack any solid foundation in careful analysis of textual and other remains. The same must be said of blanket theories or assumptions that work done by men took place ‘at home,’ or that, unlike men, women were not discernibly significant economic and cultural agents.” (pg. 19) She spends most of the book challenging these dichotomies and blanket theories to good end.

Baker’s book is comprised of four chapters. The first one outlines the major questions that will be addressed throughout the other three chapters. Here Baker discusses her methodological approach, her ideological inspirations and asks the question at the heart of the work: “How might building and dwelling practices play a part in the gender discourses of a society in which rabbinic textual practices, Jewish marriage and burial practices, synagogal practices, ritual purity practices, local and regional economic practices, and so forth also play a part?” (pg. 32) In the chapters that follow Baker discusses one location in each chapter with this question in mind.

Chapter two deals with bayit (house). Baker explores the possibility that “…a house is not where a woman/wife is, but rather a house is, in part, who and what she is” (pg. 35,
emphasis original). The possibility of this premise runs throughout the chapter, with Baker making a convincing case for it. Baker analyses carefully the archeological evidence as well and challenges the notion that women might have been shut away out of sight in private spaces in their homes. She talks about the fluidity of space in Jewish antiquity and also develops a theory of “anopticons,” which “functions in inverse fashion such that the occupant of this structure may be rendered invisible to those without, and may learn thereby to internalize a sense of relative invisibility…” (pg. 45, emphasis original).

In chapter three Baker tackles the shuk (marketplace) of Jewish antiquity. Linking the two chapters together, she pointedly notes that in assuming that women were confined to the ‘private’ home, many scholars have engaged in “a misreading of the built environment, as well as inattention to women’s economic significance in ancient Palestine.” (pg. 77) Through a meticulous reading of the archeological remains as well as a rereading of the rabbinic materials, Baker makes a compelling case for women’s presence in the shuk. She examines how women vendors are constructed as a “hybrid” (pg. 82) category in rabbinic texts and the potentialities and dangers such a status provided women with in ancient Palestine. Saliently she concludes by reimagining the shuk not merely as a physical space, but rather as “the men and women, Jews and Gentiles, battles and negotiations, texts and streets and buildings that are all elements of its sociopatial topography.” (pg. 111)

Chapter four examines the liminal spaces of hatzer and maboi (courtyard and alleyway respectively). In describing the physical spaces of hatzer and maboi Baker brings alive the distinction between ancient and modern experiences of space, rightly stressing the difference between modern, Western conceptions of ‘public’ and ‘private’ versus ancient Palestinian conceptions of space. She links the ‘hybrid’ status of women in Jewish law to the problem of these borderland spaces asking, “What, and where, were the perceptible boundaries marking gender, ethnicity, class, nation, self, and other?” (pg. 122) She concludes the chapter with a brilliant and detailed discussion of female head covering (the aforementioned “ethnic-political hairdo”) in the marketplace where [w]omen’s forms of headgear, then, like courtyards (and like women themselves), are material, discursive artifacts implicated in the negotiation or mediation of boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’; between bayit and shuk; between ‘us,’ ‘not entirely us,’ and ‘them.’ (pg. 139)

Baker opens a vision of women’s place in ancient Palestine that seriously challenges many scholars assumed perceptions about it. Though I think of myself as a feminist and, hopefully, enlightened in these matters, Rebuilding the House of Israel made me aware of the implicit assumptions about women’s space that I find I have internalized in my studies. This book is a serious, scholarly work for those knowledgeable either in Rabbinics or ancient archaeology or associated fields. It is not a populist work, but for anyone truly interested in examining the way Jewish women’s place in the ancient world
has been constructed, *Rebuilding the House of Israel* will undoubtedly become a classic work in the field.

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