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The past 2500 years has witnessed ample evidence – from the book of Ezekiel to contemporary Haredi websites (e.g., [www.templeinstitute.org](http://www.templeinstitute.org)) – of the enduring place of the Temple in Jewish practice and in the Jewish creative religious imagination, whether as a historical institution, the past and future central place of Jewish worship, or as the “umbilicus mundi,” the symbolic sacred center of the universe where God’s indwelling presence resides on earth. The tendency of this evidence is to project an idealized past and future Temple, in which holiness and sacred sacrificial worship are conducted in a perfect seamless fashion and in which God’s holiness residing in the world is projected as an unproblematic, absolute reality.

Dalia Marx, a liberal Reform Rabbi (viii), has achieved the extraordinary feat of creating what, for this reviewer at any rate, is a much more stimulating, and ultimately more compelling, vision of the Temple as a real and imagined institution than the many idealized versions. Her feminist commentary on three Mishnaic tractates, Tamid, Middot and Qinnim, and related Tannaitic and Amoraic texts, has achieved this by rendering both the historical Temple and the Temple of later Jewish religious imagination multi-vocal and complex. The goal of the commentary, and others in the Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Commentary series edited by Tal Ilan, is to focus on issues of women and gender in rabbinic texts. In the process of fulfilling this goal, Marx has also succeeded in creating a compelling view of the Temple, historical and imaginary, by the rigor, creativity and range of her scholarship: her contextualized discussion of themes and content relating to women and gender, the interdisciplinary breadth of her textual analysis and her eclectic choice of theoretical frames. Her clearly presented, jargon free, use of interdisciplinary theory and presentation of Halakhic and historical issues make this an excellent book to use in senior seminars and at the graduate level in various Jewish Studies courses: Judaism and gender, feminist hermeneutics, the history of the Second Temple Period, rabbinic thought, and the history and theory of religion.
Perhaps one of her most significant, and most ironic, conclusions related to women and gender involves the literary “afterlife” of the destroyed Temple in the rabbinic textual imagination. On one hand, the Temple’s physical absence made it more accessible to male Jews, since the entire Temple, including its most holy precincts forbidden to all but the priests and high priests were rendered visible to all male Jews through the study of texts that described the Temple. On the other hand, the reverse was true as far as women were concerned: “While women were among the pilgrims to the [historical] Temple and took part in its lay observances, they were altogether excluded from the [rabbinic] house of study,” (89) hence, restricted from access to the Temple through textual study of its rituals and precincts.

The Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud series has a very specific structure: analysis of specific isolated texts concerning women and gender in a tractate are prefaced by a General Introduction and a Feminist Introduction, the former surveying critical scholarship, the latter, the main issues concerning women and gender relevant to the tractate and the theoretical frameworks for their analysis. The commentary genre and the overall structure have the positive effect of providing a backdrop for Marx’s interdisciplinary range, as she has had to vary the theoretical perspective taken according to the specific issues of each tractate. The methodological and theoretical flexibility used for the analysis encourages many innovative conclusions about the presence and status of women in the Temple and their religious agency in pilgrimage and sacrifice. The downside to the commentary structure is that there is an occasional unevenness to the analysis, generated by the diversity of the texts under consideration. For instance, Marx’s sensitive literary analysis of the Bavli’s Alexander the Great story cycle (bTamid 31b-32b; Marx 49-76) is not well synthesized into the overall arguments of the book as a whole. This lack of integration stems, first, from the dictates of the commentary format, that requires elucidation of all materials concerning women and gender, and second, from the literary nature and redactional tendencies of the Bavli itself, which often incorporates segments of traditional Jewish text that are lack thematic integration with the subject of a tractate.

Marx’s commentary on Tamid, framed by neo-Freudian and gender theory, focuses on the “priests as a gender unto themselves,” who exhibit “a non-masculine manhood” and who perform feminine domestic tasks such as cleaning and preparing food in God’s “house.” (13-14)
The commentary on Middot uses ancient classical sources, rabbinic texts, and traditional Jewish commentaries to establish the historical presence of women in the Temple precincts, addressing the question: how far were women allowed into the hierarchical sacred space? Here religious studies theory involving the division between sacred and profane space frames the analysis. (110-111) Marx reaches a very important conclusion: “Nowhere in rabbinic literature is it stated that women were not allowed beyond the Women’s Court…Only the two end-points [of the pilgrimage] are clear: the beginning of the journey is permitted to all and the last and most inner point is prohibited to all but one person, [the High Priest on the Day of Atonement].” (113)

Rather than using an interdisciplinary theoretical frame, Marx’s commentary on Qinnim, a tractate about “nest” offerings, or sacrifices consisting of pairs of birds, utilizes traditional Jewish texts and commentaries to reconstruct the realia of the sacrificial cult during the time the Second Temple stood, focusing on women’s status and involvement in sacrificial offerings. Again, her conclusions are significant: both in terms of their “cultic religiosity” (186) and their status as individuals offering up sacrifices to God, (194) the sources show women had agency over their nest offerings, even more than that of the officiating priests. (190)

The strengths of Marx’s commentary are many: (1) a careful attention to historical and textual critical scholarship; (2) a sensitivity to the literary features of the texts and the ability to meaningfully incorporate literary criticism into the analysis; (3) an ability to communicate theoretical analysis without obscurant jargon. In this reviewer’s opinion, Marx’s greatest strength is her creative, in places daring, use of interdisciplinary theory, feminist and other, to project novel ways of understanding what the Temple meant to Jews, both men and women, in different times and places, and the role of textual traditions about women and gender in that meaning.

Although Marx never cites Gershom Scholem, his argument that post-biblical Jewish tradition (in his case, medieval kabbalah), involves the resurgence of mythical concepts of gender is assumed by her most daring theoretical analyses of worship in the Temple itself and of later rabbinic representation of that ritual. Throughout the book, Marx shows that the presence of women in the Temple was not only a historical fact, but a mythical/theological one, illustrated by the many ways, in which conceptual notions of female reproduction and the feminine were integrated into the religious meaning of Temple worship both actually, while the Temple stood,
and discursively, in the rabbinic texts redacted after its destruction. As far as the historical presence of women in the Temple precincts is concerned, Marx convincingly shows that the notion that women were restricted to the area called “the Women’s Court” and that they had little or no agency in the offering of sacrifice are later rabbinic projections rather than historical reality. Although Jewish women’s access and agency were never equal to those of Jewish men, the texts never explicitly focus on the exclusion of women or their separation from men in the Temple precincts, except for during the festival of Sukkot when special balconies were constructed for women during the Feast of the Libation, the conclusion of Temple Sukkot rituals. (mSukkot 5:4; tSukkot 4:7; Marx 147-149) Here the exception proves the rule. The rabbinic sources explicit statement that the construction of these balconies was an innovation of previous practice indicates that the ritual separation of men and women was not part of standard practice while the Temple stood.

A few highlights of Marx’s theoretically informed analysis assuming the persistence of myth in Temple ritual and its rabbinic representation show the range of her innovative insights. The notion of the priests as a “gender unto themselves” (11-15), a feminized brotherhood of males, presents two conclusions relating to underlying mythical strata in Temple practice. First, not only are the priests feminized by the domestic tasks they perform, but by their symbolic assumption of women’s biological reproductive power through the performance of sacrifice, both involving the shedding of blood: “The actual act of sacrificing…can be viewed as an alternative, transformed birth.” (15) Thus, Temple sacrifice, performed by feminized males, can be viewed as a symbolic reenactment of female reproductive bleeding. Second, Marx suggests, but does not develop, the interesting notion that sacred space and religious practice provide ways to ephemerally dissolve the strict gender roles imposed by social boundaries and expectations, “to reconsider the boundaries of gender.” (15) The ritual dissolution of social gender roles through religious performance in past and present traditional Judaism is a topic worthy of more substantial investigation.

A pervasive theme of several of her discrete points of analysis is the significant presence of the feminine, the symbolized female body and the erotic undertones of the structure of the Temple and the ritual performance enacted within it, both historically and in rabbinic representation.
Marx reads the Temple structure as a whole as a symbolic representation of the female body and female sexual organs, since both the house of God and a wife are designated by the term “house” (“bayit”) in rabbinic sources. (119-120) Moreover, in biblical and rabbinic sources the same verb, “to come” (“lavoh”) is used to describe sexual relations between a man a woman and the progress of pilgrims towards and within the Temple precincts. (121) The symbolic correlation between the Temple and the female body is also evident in the description of the curtain sealing off the Holy of Holies, which in several rabbinic sources is likened to the virginal hymen, which only one male (husband/high priest) is allowed to penetrate without the occurrence of violation or sacrilege. (44-47) Finally, the symbolism of the nest offerings evokes the mythical power of female fertility (birds, eggs and chicks) and also, according to Marx, is a symbolic representation of an external female womb. (196-198) Strikingly, Marx’s feminist interpretations of the persistence of myth involving the female body and feminine tropes never appears outlandish or forced, at least to this reader. They come across as an intuitive reading of the place of the real Temple, and its memory, in covenant theology, a theology with the goal of successful sexual reproduction at its core.

Marx’s attention to the mythical symbolism of the feminine and the female body has not made her lose sight of real Jewish women. Close attention is paid to the historical realia of the challenges, both financial and procedural, that might have confronted actual Jewish women offering up their nest offerings in the Temple. (184) Last, but not least, Marx finds many opportunities to link sacrificial procedure with women’s subjective experience of the reality of the female body (childbirth, miscarriage, post-parturiency) and the ritual expressions Jewish law and practice has prescribed for these events. (199, 203) Marx’s volume is highly recommended as a study text for advanced, intellectually curious synagogue reading groups, as well as for university students, owing to its clarity of the exposition of historical and Halakhic topics, its use of a range of traditional, critical and theoretical sources, and its innovative reminders of the many ways women, real and imagined, are agents in the creation of patriarchal Jewish culture.