8. WOMEN IN THE RELIGIOUS SYSTEM OF QUMRAN

Mayer I. Gruber
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

In 1994 Judith Hauptman pointed out:

There is no question that the individual who laid the foundation for feminist readings of rabbinc texts is Jacob Neusner. Not only has he systematically examined all of the Mishnah, tracing the development of the worldview and religious philosophy of the framers in their specific social-historical context, he has also examined this corpus from a feminist perspective and in the context of general feminist writings.¹

Hauptman refers here to Neusner’s discussion in Method and Meaning in Ancient Judaism.²

It seems not previously to have been noticed that in that very same essay Neusner also laid the foundation for the study of women in the religious system(s) of the Dead Sea Scrolls.³ Unfortunately, the state of the art in the study of women in the Dead Sea Scrolls when Neusner published Method and Meaning in Judaism was indeed represented by Isaakson’s 1965 study,⁴ which took for granted the identification of the Dead Sea Sect with the Essenes, whom ancient authors close to the scene describe as advocating and practicing celibacy.⁵

³ See the discussion in Neusner, Mishnaic System of Women, pp. 251-253.
⁴ A. Isaksson, The Ministry in the New Temple (Lund, 1965). Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Laws Pertaining to Women in the Temple Scroll,” in Devorah Dimant and Uriel Rappaport, eds., The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research (Leiden and Jerusalem, 1992), p. 210, note 2, fully acknowledges the debt all scholars owe to Neusner’s presentation of “tannaitic materials pertaining to women” and then adds the following: “The description of women in the ‘Essene writings’ which Neusner quotes from A. Isaksson...may demonstrate ‘the correct methodology’ but bears no resemblance to the evidence presented by the texts themselves.”
⁵ Eileen Schuller, “Women in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in Peter W. Flint and James C. VanderKam, eds., The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years. A Comprehensive Assessment
Eileen M. Schuller stated in 1999 that her own study published in 1994 constituted “an exploratory attempt to collect relevant texts and to formulate a method of approach.” Schuller argues most convincingly that the reason that the subject of women in the religious system(s) of the Dead Sea Scrolls was for so long not part of the scholarly agenda was the initial assumption, widely taken for granted to this very day, that the Dead Sea Scrolls were produced by “some comparatively little-known sect or monastic order, possibly the Essenes.”

No less important is the simple fact that in the academic


Schuller, op. cit., p. 117, quoting the American School of Oriental Research in its first press release in The Times of London, April 12, 1948, concerning the text now known as “The Manual of Discipline” (1Q S); similarly, Schiffman, Reclaiming, pp. 127-129 and especially p. xiii where he explains that by-and-large the tone for Dead Sea Scrolls research was set by the Roman Catholic monks at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem during the Jordanian regime 1949-1967. These scholars, saw in the Qumran community a monastic Jewish community whose members constituted their own spiritual forbears. Unfortunately, contemporary Jewish scholars tend to substitute what should be called a pan-halakhistic approach for the previous exercise in autobiographical criticism, which encouraged the promotion of the Essene hypothesis. The pan-halakhistic approach assumes that the norms of halakhah set forth in the Mishnah and Tosefta can and should serve as a basis for emending earlier legal texts produced by Jews to make them conform to the patriarchy characteristic of some of the legislation in the Mishnah and Tosefta. Typical is the debate between Hannah Cotton, Elisha Qimron, and Tal Ilan (who defend the literal, grammatical, syntactical meaning) and Adiel Schremer and Jonas Greenfield (who emend the text to make it conform to M. Yeb. 14:1, according to which only the husband can divorce the