CHAPTER TWENTY
THE IMPACT OF FEMINIST THEORY ON JEWISH STUDIES
SUSANNAH HESCHEL

Given that we possess no texts authored by Jewish women prior to the early modern period, feminist scholarship evokes the specter of writing history without a textual past and with an uncertain future. While we know that Jewish women existed, we do not have texts that they authored, and we can only surmise that their voices at times may have been recorded by attribution to men. The absence of texts known to have been written by women, preserving their points of view, interpretations, and sense of identity, does not simply leave a gap in women’s history, it also destabilizes the category of Jewish history, rendering its claims uncertain as well as incomplete.

Attention to the position of women within Judaism seems to have originated as part of Christian traditions of anti-Judaism. One of the earliest statements appeared in the Juden Büchlein of Victor von Karben (1519), in which he mocks the refusal of Jews to include women in a prayer quorum.1 The mockery continued in Johann Eisenmenger’s Entdecktes Judenthum (1700), and became a major topos among German (and some American) Protestant (and some Catholic) theologians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Franz Delitzsch, Joachim Jeremias, Johannes Leipoldt, and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel.2

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1 My thanks to Yisrael Yuval for calling my attention to this source.
but also to elevate Christianity with the claim that Jesus’ positive treatment of women stood in stark contrast to the Jewish men of his day. Jewish apologetic literature responding to such charges began to be generated in late-nineteenth-century Germany, starting with Meyer Kayserling in 1879, with a concentration on the treatment of women in rabbinic literature.³

Feminist historiography arose as an attempt to discover remnants of women’s experiences, even if their understanding of those experiences cannot be recovered. Among the best examples are Bernadette Brooten’s study, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, published in 1982, one of the earliest and most important pieces of feminist scholarship on Judaism.⁴ Brooten presented inscriptive and archaeological evidence demonstrating that women served as *archisynagogos*, leaders of their congregations in ancient Palestine, who were often seated at the front of the synagogue, and concluded that there is no archaeological evidence of a separate seating section for women in Palestinian synagogues of antiquity. Her work opened the question of when, and under what circumstances, women’s subordination in the synagogue developed, and it also demonstrated the importance of examining evidence apart from rabbinic literature for reconstructing the history of women’s lives during the Roman era. Other examples include Renee Levine Melammed’s study of *conversas*, Jewish women who converted to Christianity and were then investigated and often tortured and killed by the Spanish Inquisition,⁵ and the recovery of medieval Jewish women’s domestic experience by Elisheva Baumgarten.⁶ Other studies confine themselves to examining female images in medieval texts, and the more sophisticated applications of feminist theory to the rhetoric of male texts reveal fascinating contours of gender ideology; as an example, I would mention Susan E. Shapiro’s examination of gender rhetoric in Maimonides’ philosophical writings.⁷

⁷ Susan E. Shapiro, “A Matter of Discipline: Reading for Gender in Jewish Phi-