A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies.

This is the introductory volume to the ambitious series A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, and at the same time an introduction to the commentaries on Seder Mo'ed (Festivals). The Commentary intends to treat all tractates of the BT from a feminist perspective. The first twelve volumes will deal with the eleven BT tractates in Seder Mo'ed, and the Jerusalem Talmud's Tractate Shekalim, because there is no BT commentary on this tractate.

The book starts with an excellent general introduction to the series by Tal Ilan, in five sections: “Mishnah and Talmud”; “Feminist Commentary”; “State of Research”; “A Feminist Commentary on the Talmud”; and, “This Volume—Seder Mo'ed.” The present review will mainly deal with this introduction, as it provides important information about the project as a whole, which, when finished, will be a major new tool in Jewish studies. The first section is a very basic introduction to the talmudic literature and unnecessary for the readership of this series, which is geared towards specialists. In the section “Feminist Commentary,” Ilan places this commentary in the larger wave of the feminist movement, which, in the latter half of the 20th century spilled over from politics into academics. The main goal of the feminist project is “exposing (...) hierarchical and androcentric structures” in all “institutions and establishments,” in this case in the Bavli, which is the most authoritative and influential of Jewish scriptures, up until the present day. She then outlines the feminist terms on which the commentary will be based: “Patriarchy”; “Private and Public Space” (women’s activities being confined to the private space); “Androcentrism” (also “his-story”; a perception of reality in which the man is the center); and, “Women Studies and Gender Studies” (the latter being the wider context for women studies nowadays, particularly focusing on issues of sex and family).

Ilan’s jargon and approach is influenced by post-modernist deconstructivism, which helped shape and enriched feminist readings of texts in the last decades of the past century. Beyond criticism, feminist critique has become a constructive force, not just tearing down androcentric world-views but replacing them with readings in which women are central. See e.g. p. 8: “In order to discover real women, one must move from the first step of exposing the androcentric character of the texts to the second step, which seeks to displace this androcentric discourse by placing women in the center of a feminist reconstruction of the text. In a historical discourse, the feminist desire is to attempt a reconstruction of women’s past (and lost) role in the historical events of history [sic]. In various literary endeavors, the attempt is to discover the lost feminist voice. This can be done

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through discovering silenced voices, by employing the technique of suspicious and subversive readings.

The third section of the intro: "State of Research," demonstrates the necessity of a feminist commentary of the entire Bavli, a project that so far has not been undertaken by anyone. Ilan mentions several authors that helped lay the foundations for this project: Jacob Neusner, who, with A History of the Mishaic Law of Women (Leiden 1980), jump-started the consensus that rabbinic texts should be read in and of themselves and not in comparison to the Hebrew Bible or Christian texts; Judith Romney Wegner, with her groundbreaking book Chattel or Person: The Status of Women in the Mishnah (Oxford 1988); Judith Hauptman, who included the Tosefta in the discussion and found that the Tosefta often contained older, more lenient views on women that were edited out in the Mishnah; Shulamit Valler; the author herself; and Daniel Boyarin, who initiated the shift from "a purely women-oriented discipline to a gender oriented one."

The fourth section "A Feminist Commentary on the Talmud" outlines the nature of this long-term project that will consist of 37 additional books, corresponding to the 37 tractates in the Bavli that are commentaries on the Mishnah. Each volume will be authored by one scholar, and will include an introduction and a running commentary on the texts of the mishnah and the gemara that are relevant for gender studies. The relevancy of the texts will be decided by the authors, not the editors. The Hebrew/Aramaic text of each portion will be included, based on the Albeck edition of the Mishnah, and the Vilna edition of the Bavli. Variant manuscript readings will be added when relevant for gender issues. The mishnah will be read together with the Tosefta, and the Bavli with the Yerushalmi (Palestinian Talmud), and those texts will be represented synoptically when relevant. Sometimes other rabbinic texts, such as Midrashim, will also be presented synoptically. Each text will come with an English translation. Existing translations may be used but will be corrected based on gender issues. For the Hebrew Bible, the JTS translation will be used but equally adapted, e.g., instead of "The Lord" the name of God will be rendered as 'תל'.

The last part of the introduction deals with specific issues in the tractates in Seder Mo'ed. All papers are based on the proceedings of the conference "They also participated in the Miracle" which took place in Berlin in 2006. The title of the conference refers to a phrase that is repeated three times in Seder Mo'ed, indicating that women should also be included in a number of festival rituals, such as lighting Hannukah candles, and drinking four glasses of wine on Passover. The "also" in the phrase indicates that this was not self-evident in rabbinic times.

Shaye Cohen's "Are Women in the covenant?" is the lead article, discussion the question that is the main focus of the entire Commentary, namely the extent of the inclusion of women in the covenant between the Jewish people and God. Since circumcision is the main token of the covenant, the BT abounds with