

SASSOON, ISAAC. *The Status of Women in Jewish Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xxx+232 pp. \$85.00 (cloth).

In *The Status of Women in Jewish Tradition*, Isaac Sassoon argues that biblical, rabbinic, and scroll sources paint a varied picture of women. His analysis considers three broad themes: monogamy and marriage, obligation and performance of *mitzvot* (commandments), and textual discussion of the essence of genders, which he terms “intrinsic equality.” Although he often walks the line of apologetics, he does so with grace.

To begin his exploration, Sassoon sets out to discern “whether, or to what degree, women’s secondariness is set in stone or canonized by Judaism” (xviii). While such an inquiry has value, the project to describe the “place” or “image” of women in Jewish tradition has been explored by many scholars who grappled with these questions in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Rachel Adler, Judith Hauptmann, and Judith Romney Wegner. Sassoon cites many of these scholars, often at length, with little more analysis than a nod of agreement. However, feminists and scholars alike recognize that describing the “status” of women constitutes only the first step. Jewish studies scholars have heeded the critiques of Joan Scott and others, who argue that employing a “patriarchal” approach hinders ability to understand historical change or difference. Moreover, as Scott has demonstrated, this type of approach simultaneously critiques and asserts the primacy of gendered systems and thereby does not offer an account of how a system of social (or religious, in this case) relationships are created. Rather, the patriarchal approach does not offer the tools to go beyond description and/or denouncement. Sassoon operates on the level of descriptive textual analysis—in the vein, although not the tone, of patriarchal approaches—rendering him unable to mount a thesis beyond the recognition of “rich diversity” and “great promise” offered by Jewish textual tradition on the subject of women (171). This thesis, if not novel, does allow Sassoon to explore a variety of rich texts.

Sassoon concludes that the Torah, Talmud, and Dead Sea Scroll documents contain multiple voices. He refers to the idea of a Judaism that is “undifferentiated and synchronic and possessed of monolithic set of texts” as “a lugubrious myth” (ix). The presence of multiple voices has become a truism among scholars of biblical and rabbinic literature. As the block quotations (which sometimes occupy nearly a full page) from scholars like Michael Fishbane and Jon Levenson demonstrate, Sassoon is well read, but he often simply reiterates the analysis of others. While he notes that “historians and feminists—two groups to have grappled with the material—know the drill,” both historians and feminists may find much of the analysis so familiar as to wonder where his innovation lies. The place where Sassoon is at his best, and his most significant contribution to otherwise well-trodden ground, is not in his argument but in his close textual analyses of sources, in particular Dead Sea Scrolls material. His exegesis of parts of the Damascus Covenant, for instance, provides the main support for his claim that “ishah al ahotah” in Leviticus 18:18 should be read as a prohibition of polygyny.

Jewish “tradition” for Sassoon is synonymous with its textual tradition, and that textual tradition is limited to Torah in its oral and written forms. He seeks to demonstrate that Judaism possesses textual support for women as human beings and religious beings equal to—but not identical to—men. In order to do so, he suggests that the Tanakh and rabbinic texts contain the truest version

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of the tradition and have been misread by others throughout the years. For instance, the injunction for a (presumably male) Jew to recite, "Thank God who has not made me a woman" is preserved as a *baraita* in the Babylonian Talmud Menachot 43b. Sassoon claims that the fourteenth-century Joshua Ibn Shuaib "is projecting his own idiosyncrasy onto the Talmud" (122) by citing the text in favor of his position that men's and women's souls are different. Sassoon instead suggests that the difference of souls idea must have come from Plato, Kabbalah, or some other non-Torah source. He never mentions the Talmudic tradition that "women are a separate people," essentially unlike men (BT Shabbat 62a). While there is certainly scholarly support for influences, this exemplifies Sassoon's approach to identify "problem" texts and associate their perceived shortcomings with misreading motivated by non-Torah factors.

Such a seek-and-destroy approach—to find individual potential patriarchal texts and provide a nonmisogynistic alternative reading—is in some ways successful, in much the same way that earlier feminist patriarchal approaches were. Sassoon provides compelling exegetical and philological arguments for many of these individual texts. But to prove that individual texts can be read differently or with a more woman-friendly meaning cannot ultimately demonstrate that the tradition as a whole embraces "intrinsic equality." At best, it can suggest that the tradition contains within it the textual resources to support one such interpretation.

The Status of Women in Jewish Tradition is a great resource for traditional Jews who are seeking textual ways to support an inclusive and equal (if not identical) place for women. Sassoon proves to be an insightful reader of primary texts and widely conversant with other secondary literature about Jewish textual tradition, but ultimately this book belongs more on the shelf with personal study bibles than it does scholarly research.

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SAMELY, ALEXANDER. *Forms of Rabbinic Literature and Thought: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. vii+279 pp. \$99.00 (cloth).

This immensely stimulating, sophisticated, and difficult book seeks to provide an orientation to the literature of rabbinic Judaism; an orientation, however, that differs fundamentally from that offered in other introductory works. What sets this work apart is its rigorous form-analytic, text-immanent, and hermeneutic focus. Rather than offering an overview of basic rabbinic concepts or beliefs, this book is determined to describe rabbinic Judaism primarily by means of its forms of literary production, being strongly convinced that rabbinic thought itself is inseparable from the nature of the rabbinic documents and the character of rabbinic textuality. It is thus a book about the meaning of rabbinic literary forms, and about what the shape of this literature implies for rabbinic thought.

Such an approach stands in contrast to the widespread tendency to interpret rabbinic Judaism on the basis of a synthesis of the meaning of individual legal or theological statements within these documents. As Samely argues, the nature of these texts, and in particular the profound absence of summarizing statements that would reliably articulate the general principles of a rabbinic system of law and belief, renders the status of such modern syntheses highly uncertain. At the same time, that approach tends to neglect the significance of the literary