

# BLAMING JEWS FOR INVENTING PATRIARCHY

BY JUDITH PLASKOW

There is a new myth developing in Christian feminist circles. It is a myth which tells us that the ancient Hebrews invented patriarchy: that before them the goddess reigned in matriarchal glory, and that after them Jesus tried to restore egalitarianism but was foiled by the persistence of Jewish attitudes within the Christian tradition. It is a myth, in other words, which perpetuates traditional Christianity's negative picture of Judaism by attributing sexist attitudes to Christianity's Jewish origins, at the same time maintaining that Christianity's distinctive contributions to the "woman question" are largely positive.

The consequence of this myth is that feminism is turned into another weapon in the Christian anti-Judaic arsenal. Christian feminism gives a new slant to the old theme of Christian superiority, a theme rooted in the New Testament and since reiterated by countless Christian theologians.

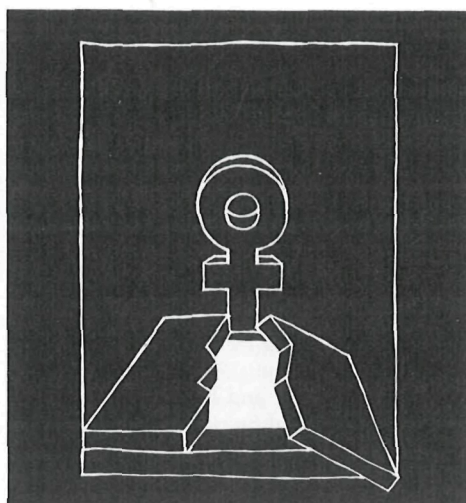
Invidious comparisons between Judaism and Christianity most often appear in one particular context in feminist work. Writers exploring the Jewish background of Jesus' attitudes toward women frequently exaggerate the plight of women in Judaism in order to make Jesus' position stand out more positively in contrast. If Jewish women are unclean chattels, then Jesus' treatment of them must be revolutionary. "Jesus was a feminist," as Leonard Swidler put it.

Understanding Jesus' relations with women in the historical context of contemporary Judaism is surely a legitimate and important task. But many feminist accounts of Jesus' Jewish milieu suffer from three serious scholarly errors or oversights which are rooted in biased views of Jesus' Jewish origins.

First of all, a number of discussions of Jewish attitudes towards women use the Talmud or passages from it to establish the role of Jewish women in Jesus' time. The Talmud however, is a compilation of Jewish law and argument which was not given final form until the sixth century. Passages in it may be much older or at least reflect reworkings of earlier material. But this can be determined only on the basis of painstaking scholarly sifting of individual texts. Such sifting clearly has not been done by authors who can blithely refer to the whole Talmudic tractate *Sabbath* as contemporary with Christ or who can say that certain taboos against women were incorporated into the Talmud "and from there passed on into Christianity."

Similarly, references to rabbinic customs or sayings as contemporary with Jesus also reflect a misunderstanding of the development of Judaism. The Rabbinate emerged as an institution only after the fall of the Temple in 70 C.E.,

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and it took considerable time before rabbinic authority was consolidated and came to represent more than a minority opinion within the Jewish community.

Secondly, it is deceptive to speak of rabbinic opinion, customs, or sayings as monolithic. Even if one assumes that the Talmud gives an accurate picture of Jesus' Jewish background, the Talmud is at least as ambivalent as the New Testament on the subject of women. Yet writers dealing with Jewish attitudes towards women often select only the most negative rabbinic passages on the topic. Their treatment of Judaism is analogous to conservative Christian arguments for the subordination of women which quote only certain verses from Paul. Perhaps the most egregious instance of this type of distortion of Jewish tradition is Virginia Mollenkott's statement that "the Rabbis" would have been shocked and alienated by Christian belief in the mutual love and service of husband and wife. Is she speaking of "the Rabbis" who said "Love your wife as yourself, honor her more than yourself," or "If your wife is small, stoop and whisper in her ear?" Certainly, there are many dreadful rabbinic sayings about the relationship between husband and wife, but there are also a large number of precepts celebrating the joys of a loving match. And if the negative statements influenced Jesus and the New Testament authors (a questionable assumption!), then the positive ones must have as well.

The third error frequently made by feminist scholars is more subtle. It lies in comparing the words and attitudes of an itinerant preacher with laws and sayings formulated in the rarefied atmosphere of rabbinic academies. Many discrepancies between Jesus and "the Rabbis" on the subject of women can be explained by the fact that Jesus was constantly in contact with real women, speaking to and about them in the context of concrete situations. Rabbinic discussions about women, on the other hand, were often largely theoretical, taking place in institutions where no women were present. Where we do have rabbinic stories of actual male/female interaction, we find that rabbis

too—whatever their ideological statements—were capable of reacting to women as persons. The often-quoted story of Jesus' compassion for the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53ff), for example, finds a parallel in a rabbinic anecdote told of Rabbi Meir. A man became so angry at his wife for staying out late attending Meir's sermons that he vowed to bar her from the house unless she spat in Meir's face. Meir, hearing of this, sent for the woman and told her that his eyes were sore and could be cured only if a woman spat on them. The woman was then able to go home and tell her husband that she had spit on Meir seven times. The theological point of this story is not the same as the New Testament one. But it is not very different in showing a rabbi react with concern and sympathy for the trials of an ordinary woman.

These deficiencies in feminist scholarship are serious, and they suggest the need for major revisions in the treatment of Jesus' Jewish background. Required, first of all, is honest, balanced, non-polemical discussion of those texts which are in fact contemporary with Jesus. Such discussion should take into account variations in Jewish practice in different areas of the ancient world as well as differences in the setting and audience of Jewish and Christian material. Only when Christian feminists have deepened their understanding of Judaism can they honestly evaluate the uniqueness or non-uniqueness of Jesus' attitudes towards women.

At the same time that Jesus' milieu is being reevaluated, the Talmudic rabbis ought to be compared with their true contemporaries—the Church Fathers.

Admittedly, this task is less rewarding than comparison of the Talmud with Jesus: examination of rabbinic and patristic attitudes towards women leaves neither Christians nor Jews much room for self-congratulation. Rather, what is immediately striking is the similarity between the two traditions—in both, the developing association of women with sexuality and the fear of woman as temptress. Christianity compensates for the image of the temptress with that of virgin; Judaism, with the good wife with whom sex is permitted and even encouraged. But while these images saddle women with different disabilities and provide them with different opportunities, it would be difficult, and certainly pointless, to label one superior to the other.

The persistence of biased presentations of Judaism in feminist work is disturbing. But were sloppy scholarship the only issue at stake in feminist anti-Judaism, it could easily be corrected. Much more important, the popularity of such research indicates a profound failure of the feminist ethic. The morality of patriarchy, Mary Daly argues, is characterized by "a failure to lay claim to that part of the psyche that is then projected onto 'the Other.'" Throughout the history of Western thought, women, blacks, and other oppressed groups have had attributed to them as their nature human traits which men could or would not



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acknowledge in themselves. Sexuality, bodiliness, dependence, moral and intellectual failure were all peculiarities which belonged to everyone except ruling class males. The feminist ethic, in contrast to this, is supposedly an ethic of wholeness, an ethic based on the withdrawal of projection and the recognition that the full humanity of each of us embraces those despised characteristics patriarchy ascribed to a host of "Others."

Christian feminist anti-Judaism, however, represents precisely the continuation of a patriarchal ethic of projection. Feminist research projects onto Judaism the failure of the Christian tradition unambiguously to renounce sexism. It projects onto Judaism the "backsliding" of a tradition which was to develop sexism in new and virulent directions. It thus allows the Christian feminist to avoid confronting the failures of her/his own tradition. This is the real motive behind biased presentations of Jesus' Jewish background: to allow the feminist to present the "true" Christian tradition as uniquely free from sexism. Otherwise, why not present positive Jewish sayings about women along with the negative ones? The former are just as conspicuous as the latter in English anthologies of rabbinic thought. And why not compare the Talmud with the Fathers instead of Jesus? Clearly, because that would not permit as dramatic a contrast between the two traditions.

The "Other" who is the recipient of these projections is, of course, the same Other who has received the shadow side of the Christian self since the beginnings of the Christian tradition. Feminists should know better! During the period when witch persecutions were at their peak, witches and Jews were the Church's interchangeable enemies. When the Inquisition ran out of Jews, it persecuted witches—and vice versa. This fact alone should alert feminists to the need to examine and exorcise a form of projection which bears close resemblances to misogyny. But besides this, what Other is more truly a part of the Christian than the Jew. Where should the withdrawal of projection begin than with Judaism. Yet women who are concerned with the relation between feminism and every other form of oppression are content mindlessly to echo traditional Christian attitudes towards Judaism.

The purpose of these criticisms of feminist scholarship is not to suggest that traditional Jewish attitudes towards women are praiseworthy. Of course, they are not. But Christian attitudes are in no way essentially different. They are different in detail, and these differences are extremely interesting and worthy of study. But weighed in the feminist balance, both traditions must be found wanting—and more or less to the same degree. The real tragedy is that the feminist revolution has furnished one more occasion for the projection of Christian failure onto Judaism. It ought to provide the opportunity for transcending ancient differences in the common battle against sexism. □

Christ, Carol P. and Judith Plaskow, Eds.: *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (Harper & Row, 1979).  
Engelsman, Joan Chamberlain: *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Westminster Press, 1979).  
Goldenberg, Naomi R.: *Changing of the Gods* (Beacon Press, 1979).  
Ochs, Carol: *Behind the Sex of God* (Beacon Press, 1977).  
Patai, Raphael: *The Hebrew Goddess* (Ktav, 1967; pap.: Avon, 1978).  
Ruether, Rosemary and Eleanor McLaughlin, Eds.: *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian traditions* (Simon and Schuster, 1979).  
Starhawk: *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion and the Great Goddess* (Harper & Row, 1979).  
Stone, Merlin: *When God Was a Woman* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).  
Strober, Gerald S.: *Portrait of the Elder Brother* (American Jewish Committee, 1972).  
Swidler, Leonard: *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Westminster Press, 1979).

There has been an explosion of exploration by feminists seeking alternatives to theologies rooted in and reflecting the male experience. These 10 works, and most especially the two anthologies—*Women of Spirit* and *Womanspirit Rising*—provide a diversity of religious options while making obvious the differing agendas of the reformists and the revolutionaries.

The reformists, mostly Christian feminists, are examining their heritage, researching and reconstructing the past in an effort to remove layers of sexism in religion and to uncover what they regard as the essential core of their traditions. While rejecting any misogyny within their faith, they remain loyal to their religion, seeking change from within the system.

The revolutionary feminists reject such loyalty, considering all religious tradition irredeemably sexist, and turn to other sources in their search for spirituality. Some, seeing divinity within women, seek new symbols, new rituals based on women's experiences, dreams, fantasies and literature. Others, seeking freedom from the past, are returning to ancient symbols of womanspirit such as witchcraft (*The Spiral Dance*) and Goddess worship. Some even suggest that a modern form of polytheism is necessary to reflect the diversity of imagery. Still others offer Jungian psychology as a replacement for religion, although Naomi Goldenberg warns in *Changing of the Gods* that this system supports stereotyped notions of masculine and feminine.

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A common thread weaves through this diversity of material: Judaism is singled out by many feminists—reformists and revolutionaries, religious and anti-religious—as the source of society's sexism.

In their desire to prove that Christianity is not innately sexist, some Christian feminists have all too often unintentionally but unquestioningly incorporated the anti-Semitic prejudices of Christian male theologians of the past. References abound in their works purporting to trace the sexism of Christianity to its Judaic heritage. Paul's negative statements about women are attributed to his Jewish heritage, while Jesus is depicted as standing in opposition to Jewish society in his support of women.

Even Leonard Swidler, who acknowledges in *Biblical Affirmations of Women* that Jesus was "an observant, Torah-true Jew... standing very much in the Jewish, Pharisaic tradition of his day," claims that Jesus was unique among his peers in his positive attitudes towards women. Not even Jesus' expressions of concern for the widowed, long a part of Prophetic tradition, are attributed to his Jewish heritage.

The term "Judeo-Christian heritage" crops up again and again in these books, as if Judaism and Christianity were one. This simplistic usage ignores the fact that Jews and Christians do not share a unified common historical experience, nor do we interpret in the same way the Scripture that we do share. Judaism and Christianity are not monolithic in their treatment of women and also discriminate against women in different ways. The sexism in Christianity, therefore, cannot be attributed solely to its Jewish roots, as many of these authors do.

The old Christian charge of Deicide, that the Jews murdered God incarnate in the ultimate masculine body form of Jesus Christ—rejected in recent times by many denominations—is now being resurrected by some revolutionary feminists in different form: the accusation that the Hebrew people were responsible for the destruction of the ultimate feminine deity, the Goddess.

Merlin Stone, in *When God Was a Woman*, describes the Hebrews as ruthlessly supplanting Goddess worship with the monotheistic male Hebrew deity:

"Into the laws of the Levites was written the destruction of the worship of the Divine Ancestress, and with it the final destruction of the matrilineal system."

While acknowledging that the elimination of Goddess worship started long before the appearance of the Hebrew people and continued until the last Goddess temple was destroyed by the Christians in the fifth century, C.E., Stone fails to note (as Raphael Patai does) that monotheism involved the destruction of all idolatry of both male and female deities.

This charge of Goddess-murder has been added to the feminist arsenal of accusations against the Hebrew people.

The most blatant distortion of Judaism oc-