

RLST 124I: Varieties of Ancient Judaism
Spring 2009
Handout #11 (June 2, 2009)
“Women and the Margins of Jewish Identity”

patriarchy/patriarchal: literally, “rule of the father”; used to describe a society in which men “naturally” have greater rights of personhood than women (usually embodied in strictly hierarchical family structures and the disempowerment of women in society)

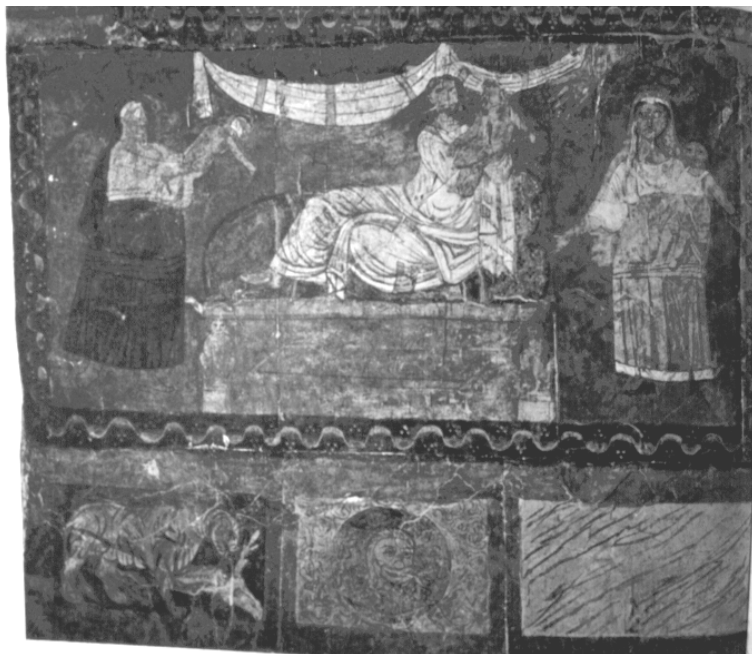
misogyny/misogynistic: literally, “woman-hating”; used to describe systems, societies, or discourses that are actively “anti-woman”

androcentrism/androcentric: literally, “man-centered”; used to describe attitudes, discourses, or texts written from a male perspective; usually also used to describe literature written *by* men, on the assumption that the exclusion of women from literary production results in an **androcentric** literary culture

archisynagōgē: literally, “[female] head of the synagogue”; a title of respect (also found in masculine form: *archisynagōgos*) for women found uniquely in synagogue inscriptions from late antiquity

levirate widow: a childless woman whose husband has died; according to Torah legislation, the husband’s surviving brother has a duty to marry (and reproduce with) the woman in his late brother’s name; the brother can also free the woman from this obligation to marry at will

agunah: a “chained woman”: a woman whose husband has left her (or otherwise become absent from the household) without issuing an official writ of divorce, so that she is not free to remarry



Elijah heals the widow’s son (1 Kings 17:17-24); a mural painting from the synagogue of Dura Europos (destroyed in 256) (from <http://research.yale.edu/divdl/images/eikon/ei0640s.jpg>)

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Handout #11 (May 28, 2009)

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CIJ 741. Marble plaque from Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey). Greek. Probably second century CE

Rufina, *Ioudaia*, head of the synagogue (*archisynagoge*), built this tomb for her freed slaves and the slaves raised in her house. No one else has the right to bury anyone (here). Anyone who dares to do so will pay 1500 denaria to the sacred treasury and 1000 denaria to the Jewish people. A copy of this inscription has been placed in the (public) archives.

CIJ 738. A Greek inscription from Ionia in Asia Minor (Turkey), probably third century C.E. Translation

Kraemer, *Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons, Monastics: A Sourcebook on Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World* 60.

Tation, daughter of Straton, son of Empedon, having erected the assembly hall and the enclosure of the open courtyard with her own funds, have them as a gift to the Jews. The synagogue of the Jews honored Tation, daughter of Straton, son of Empedon, with a golden crown, and the privilege of sitting in the seat of honor.

(both translations from <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rs/courses/rs135/samples.html>)

For a period of two years Abraham could devote himself undisturbed to his chosen task of turning the hearts of men to God and his teachings. In his pious undertaking he was aided by his wife Sarah, whom he had married in the meantime. While he exhorted the men and sought to convert them, Sarah addressed herself to the women. She was a helpmeet worthy of Abraham. Indeed, in prophetic powers she ranked higher than her husband. She was sometimes called Iscah, "the seer," on that account. (*Genesis Rabbah*)

Assessment of injury in money or monetary value must be made before a court of law and from the mouth of witnesses who are freemen and Sons of the Covenant. Women may be parties in [suits concerning] injury. Moreover the injured and the injurer [in certain cases may share] in the compensation. (*m. Baba K. 1:3*)

R. Simlai came to R. Johanan and said to him, "Let Master teach me the contents of the book of ancestry," and R. Johanan asked him: "Where do you come from?" He replied: "From Lydda," "And where do you live?" asked R. Johanan. "In Neherdai," was the reply. R. Johanan then remarked: "The contents of the book of ancestry must not be taught to inhabitants of Lydda or Neherdai, and so much the more you, who was born in Lydda and lives in Neherdai, should certainly not be taught." R. Simlai, however, was persistent, and persuaded R. Johanan to grant his request, whereupon R. Simlai remarked: "You can teach me the contents of that book in three months." So R. Johanan picked up a clod of soil and threw it at R. Simlai, saying: "If Beruria, the wife of R. Meir, who was also the daughter of R. Hanina ben Tharadion, and who could learn three hundred Halakhas from three hundred great men in one day, could still not master the contents of the book of ancestry in three years, would you then learn it in three months?" (*b. Pes. 62b*)

R. Jose the Galilean was travelling on the road. He met Beruria (the wife of R. Meir) and asked her: "Which way must we take to the city of Lud?" She answered: "You Galilean fool! Did not our sages say that you should not converse much with a woman? You should have asked, 'Which way to Lud?'" The same Beruria once found a young scholar learning quietly to himself. She scolded him and said: "It is written [2 Sam 23:5]: 'Firm in all and sure,' which signifies, that if the Law is firmly imbedded in all the two hundred and forty-eight members of the body it can remain with the man, otherwise it can not [*i.e.*, it must be recited aloud]." We have learned that there was a disciple of R. Eliezer, who learned quietly to himself and in the course of three years he forgot all he had learned. (*b. Erub. 53a-b*)

The master said: "One must not pass by bread." Said R. Johanan in the name of R. Simeon ben Yohai: This was said in the earlier generations when the daughters of Israel had not yet resorted to witchcraft, but in the latter generations when they began to practice it, bread may be passed by, lest it be bewitched. We have learned in a *beraita*: Whole loaves of bread may be passed by, because they may be bewitched, but pieces of bread should not, as there is no fear of their being bewitched. (*b. Erub. 64b*)