

# Reading Androcentrism against the Grain: Women, Sex, and Torah-Study

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For Dr. Ruth Stein

The more we learn about comparable gender-segregated, pre-industrial societies, particularly in the Mediterranean area, the more it seems that most of men's observations and moral judgments about women and sex and so forth have minimal descriptive validity and are best understood as coffeehouse talk, addressed to men themselves. Women, we should emphasize, in all their separate groupings by age, neighborhood, and class, may differ widely from each other and from community to community in the degree to which they obey, resist, or even notice the existence of such palaver as men indulge in when going through their bonding rituals. To know when any such male law-givers—medical, moral, or marital, whether smart or stupid—are (to put it bluntly) bluffing or spinning fantasies or justifying their druthers is so hard that most historians of ideas—Foucault, for all that he is exceptional is no exception here—never try. (Winkler 1989: 6)

One of the most important insights of feminist research into ancient societies in the last several years has been the realization that it is not possible to take what texts say about women's position in society at face value (Bynum 1986: 258). This is the case even when what is being

Mieke Bal, Alice Boyarin, Sarah Hammer, Marc Hirshman, Haim Milikovsky, Hannah Safrai, Elissa Sampson, and Ellen Spolsky read earlier versions and rendered me very important criticism and help. Nevertheless, naturally, only I am responsible for the positions taken here. The paper was delivered at a colloquium of the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, on February 21, 1990. A briefer version comprising primarily the textual studies per se was delivered at the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, in August 1989, and published in Hebrew in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* (Boyarin 1990).

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said seems negative and unflattering to the society from our point of view—for example, when the texts deny to women any power in the social or cultural structure. In such cases, reading only the misogyny or androcentrism of the texts can itself be a misogynistic gesture, for it leads us to negate the possibility that women had in fact a much more active, creative role than the texts would have us believe. In assessing, then, both women's history and the history of men's attitudes towards sex and gender, it is important to test what the dominant texts say in their dominant voices against discordant or counter-normative voices within the texts, as well as against other types of texts, such as inscriptions and the like, which provide other perspectives.

Classical talmudic Judaism<sup>1</sup> denies women access to the most valued practice of the culture, the study of Torah.<sup>2</sup> The significance of this exclusion has been discussed by many scholars, most recently by Peter Brown in his monumental work, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988: 118 and esp. 145). However, it has been much less recognized that there are voices within the texts that oppose this exclusion. It is a measure of Brown's sophistication as a scholar that he warns:

The reader must always bear in mind the composite nature of any over-all presentation of Judaism, drawn as it is largely from the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud—that is, from writings of widely differing periods and regions. Such sources may serve to delineate certain general horizons and to emphasize certain options taken among the rabbis of Palestine and Babylonia in the course of the late antique period; but they can be used only with great caution. (Brown 1988: 35 n. 7)

1. This designation indicates two things: first, that I am speaking here of the Judaism of the talmudic period—the first six centuries of the Common Era; and secondly, that I am referring to the variety of Judaism that produced the talmudic texts, that is, not the Alexandrian Judaism of Philo or other Palestinian sects or early Jewish Christianity, all of which are very different from each other on precisely the issues treated here.

2. This formulation already points up the paradoxicality of my very inquiry here by the assumption it makes that Judaism is "male" and can deny or impart to women some "privilege." When I presented this paper at the University of California, Berkeley, a question was raised as to the historical significance of this evidence from the point of view of feminist historiography. In brief, the question was, Why should we assume that the learning of Torah and indeed the entire authority structure of rabbinic Judaism was relevant to women, then or now? Perhaps a feminist historiography must reconstruct entirely different models of Jewish piety in order to be meaningful at all. The question is challenging and legitimate, but rather than make any attempt to address that issue here, I prefer to present my analysis of the texts and leave the question of its significance for feminist practice to another essay. Here I will say only that this does not seem to be entirely different from the question of *écriture féminine*.

At the same time it must be emphasized that much more can be made of the talmudic texts on these issues than has been done until now. By careful, symptomatic reading of the Talmuds and cognate texts, the traces of more than one ideological strain can be teased out precisely on this vitally important issue. An underlying assumption upon which this essay will be based is that the amount of energy which a culture expends in order to suppress or marginalize an ideological voice forms a reliable index to the effectiveness of that voice as posing a threat to the hegemonic practices of that culture.<sup>3</sup> My major contention is that there was a significant difference between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds with regard to the empowering (or disempowering) of women to study Torah. Both in the Palestinian and in the Babylonian text the dominant discourse suppressed women's voices in the House of Study. These texts, however, provide evidence that in Palestine a dissident voice was tolerated, while in Babylonia this issue seems to have been so threatening that even a minority voice had to be entirely expunged. It must be emphasized, however, that this evidence alone is not self-interpreting because the suppression of this voice in Babylonia could mean two opposite things: either that women never had access to the study of Torah there, or, alternatively—that women often studied Torah in Babylonia, and that this was the source of the panicky reaction shown by the text.

A word should be said about the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds at this point. Ostensibly commentary on the Mishna (redacted Palestine 2d century of the Common Era), they are more like encyclopediae of Jewish culture in the time and place of its production. These texts are multigeneric; we find in them legal commentary, parody and satire, descriptions and prescriptions for medical and magical praxis, and legendary history. Moreover, they comprise materials which were transmitted orally for hundreds of years, and between Palestine and Babylonia and the reverse, finally to be edited into two Talmuds (the Palestinian in the fourth century and the Babylonian in the sixth), and even then the editing was multivocalic. My hope is that the very dialogism and diffusion of authority within the talmudic texts (even though that authority is exclusively male) will provide not only evidence of the hegemonic discourse but also symptoms of dissident voices and realities within the society that impart to women the power of speech in Torah-learning.

Three texts will be read in search of the symptoms of oppositional discourse in Palestinian culture and of its suppression in Babylonia.

3. I do not have to travel too far in my "real world" to find evidence for this assumption.

Each text belongs to an entirely different literary genre, but they all point in the same direction. In the first section, halakhic (ritual law) texts and their differing versions in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds will be interpreted, and the second section will focus on a clearly fictional narrative recounting the terrible end of a historical female scholar, the legendary figure Beruriah.

### I. Ritual Texts

The first ritual text is a passage in which, counter to the hegemonic view, a prominent rabbi, Ben-Azzai, holds that it is a religious obligation for a father [!] to teach his daughter Torah. We are fortunate in having the legal-hermeneutic responses to this text of two, closely related cultures, as both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds have interpreted it. The claim that I wish to make is that looking at the differences between the techniques with which each culture rejects Ben-Azzai's view can teach us something about the differential threat that it posed to the social practices of the two Jewish cultures. My main point will be that, while only ambivalently feminist from our point of view, the way that this text is nullified in the Babylonian Talmud is symptomatic of how great a threat it was perceived to be in that culture. The Palestinian tradition, in contrast, seems much more sanguine about the possibility that there could be women among talmudic and Torah scholars.

Interestingly enough, the context of Ben-Azzai's statement is the discussion in the Mishna of the ordeal of the "errant wife." The biblical text, which is found in Numbers 5:11–31, deals with the case of a man who has become jealous of his wife, believing that she has had sexual relations with another. An elaborate ritual ordeal is prescribed, during which the woman drinks water into which this very passage of the Torah has been literally dissolved. If she is innocent, nothing happens, and she is rewarded liberally by God. If she is guilty, however, appalling physical consequences ensue (also from God) from her drinking of these bitter waters.

The Mishna, in accordance with its general practice, goes into great and very specific detail to prescribe the conditions under which the ritual is to be performed and its effects. Immediately after indicating what happens to the guilty woman upon imbibing the water, the text says:

If she had merit, her merit will mitigate [the punishment] for her.

On this basis Ben-Azzai said, "A man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah, so that if she drinks [the bitter water], she will know—for merit mitigates."

Rabbi Eliezer says, “Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her lasciviousness.”<sup>4</sup> (*Mishna Sotah*, chapter 3, paragraph 4)

The two Talmuds offer directly opposed interpretations of this text. The Palestinian reading is that the merit which mitigates the punishment is the merit of having studied Torah, and therefore, a father who wishes to protect his daughter should teach her Torah. The Babylonian Talmud, however, although not directly interpreting Ben-Azzai, manages to imply that, according to him, all the father is intended to teach his daughter is the very fact that merit mitigates.<sup>5</sup> The reason that such teaching should be important, and indeed why Ben-Azzai should phrase such a limited teaching as “teaching Torah,” are questions left unanswered. Moreover, according to that reading, the merit which mitigates is *not the merit of knowing Torah* but some other merit entirely. According to the Palestinian reading, in contrast, the knowledge that the daughter should have of Torah is in no way restricted to issues having to do with the ritual of the errant wife, and it is the very merit of having studied Torah which stands in her favor. This view would lead then to a practice in which women would have studied

4. For this as the correct reading, see Epstein (1964: 536). The word which I have translated here as “lasciviousness,” *tifluth*, means literally “childish things” or “foolishness,” as we find in the midrash *Bamidbar Rabbah* 4:20, where we are told of a child who speaks *tifluth* during prayer, to which his father answers, “What shall I do? He is a child and he plays!” However, it is a frequent euphemism for lasciviousness, as we can see clearly from the following text: “To bring Vashti the Queen before the King in her royal crown” [Esther 1:12]. Rabbi Aibo said, “It is the atonement of Israel that when they eat and drink and are merry, they bless and sing the praises of God; when the nations of the world eat and drink they deal in matters of *tifluth*: One says Medean women are beautiful, and the other says, Persian women are beautiful. That fool (Ahashuerosh) said to them, ‘the vessel that I use is neither Medean nor Persian but Chaldean! Do you wish to see her?’ They said, ‘Yes, on condition that she is naked’” [*Esther Rabbah* 3:13]. In this misogynistic context (actually one quite hostile to the King’s misogyny—but on this at another time and place), it is quite clear that *tifluth* has the sense of lasciviousness, and see also *Tanhuma Exodus* 28, which says that “all kisses are of *tifluth*, except for the kiss of parting, the kiss of honoring and the kiss of meeting.” Finally, the very context of our Mishna supports this interpretation, for the continuation is Rabbi Yehoshua’s claim that a woman “prefers one measure of food with *tifluth* to nine measures with sexual abstinence,” i.e., a poor but lusty husband is preferable. Incidentally, the context of Rabbi Yehoshua’s statement suggests that the term is not even being used pejoratively by him, but this needs further investigation. See also Epstein (1964: 670).

5. In all candor it must be admitted that this is the simplest translation of the text as well, for it is read most easily as, “she will know *that* merit mitigates.” However, as I claim above, this makes the statement practically incoherent, and the Hebrew can be read as I have translated it, which certainly seems to be the Palestinian understanding.

Torah no less than men, for in a situation in which merit is required, the more the better. Since the rabbinic discourse had enormous normative force in Jewish culture, such an interpretation would have had quite radical implications for the status of women in a society where the study of Torah was the most valued of all practices. It leads to a construction of gender in which the roles of the sexes in symbolic life are not nearly as sharply differentiated as they have been in all traditional Mediterranean societies, including Judaism.

Not entirely surprisingly, it was Rabbi Eliezer's view—the antithesis of Ben-Azzai's—which became the accepted religious law.<sup>6</sup> What is more surprising is that Ben-Azzai's pronouncement was simply interpreted out of existence in the Babylonian Talmud. The Talmud signals its intention to do away with Ben-Azzai's view by the following, rather dramatic, means. It begins by quoting the entire passage of the Mishna as a lemma for interpretation (which I, like the Talmud, will cite again):

*Mishna:* Ben-Azzai said, "A man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah, so that if she drinks [the bitter water], she will know—for merit mitigates." Rabbi Eliezer says, "Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her lasciviousness."

The Babylonian Talmud thus cites both views of the Mishna; however, at this point, the Talmud says nothing at all about Ben-Azzai and skips right ahead to interpreting Rabbi Eliezer's claim that one who teaches his daughter teaches her sexual impropriety:

*Talmud:* Does it indeed mean lasciviousness?! No, [he said that] it is *as if* he had taught her lasciviousness.

I will return to the Talmud's interpretation of R. Eliezer's view below, but for the moment what concerns me is the treatment of Ben-Azzai. That is to say, what we have here is a quotation of the two opposing views as a text for interpretation, but the Talmud's interpretive discourse banishes Ben-Azzai, with a ban as severe as an excommunication, by simply ignoring his statement entirely and beginning immediately to interpret R. Eliezer. Modern scholarship repeats the gesture of the Talmud, when Brown also "erases" Ben-Azzai's view:

In Judaism, rabbis were remembered to have declared that women had no place in the intense and intimate atmosphere in which male students studied the Law: to teach Torah to one's daughter was tantamount to teaching her immorality. (1988: 118)

6. That is, it is the view which was accepted by the Babylonian Talmud, and thus became the regnant position in later Judaism where the Babylonian tradition was absolutely dominant. For the ambiguous position of the Palestinian Talmud on this issue, see below.

The first bicolon is undoubtedly generally correct; the second only correct for a certain strain within the culture—hegemonic, to be sure, but not unchallenged by an internal oppositional discourse. The contemporary scholar, rather than criticizing the ideological imposition of the redactorial level of the text, thus inadvertently reiterates it and reinforces the silencing of Ben-Azzai's voice that the Babylonian editor performs.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, when the Babylonian Talmud does discuss the issue of what merit it is that mitigates the woman's punishment, the possibility that it is the merit of the study of the Torah is discarded out of hand—*in spite of the fact that the most plausible reading of Ben-Azzai is that he claims it is precisely this merit which is effective here*. Thus we find the Talmud saying:

*Mishna*: If she had merit, her merit will mitigate [the punishment] for her. *Talmud*: What sort of merit? Perhaps we will say, the merit of the study of Torah, but she is not commanded to do so! So it must mean the merit of [performing] commandments. The merit of commandments can hardly protect to such an extent, for we have learned, so did Rabbi Menahem the son of Yossi expound: "For a commandment is a candle and the Torah is a light [Proverbs 6:23]." Scripture compared the commandment to a candle and the Torah to a light, to say to you, just as a candle only protects for an hour, so does the commandment only protect for an hour (i.e., while it is actually being performed), but as light protects forever, so does the Torah protect forever. . . .

Ravina said: Indeed it is the merit of Torah, and as for what you said that she is not commanded to do so—indeed, she is not commanded, but by the merit of her taking her sons to study Torah and Mishna and waiting for her husband to come home from the study house [she is protected].<sup>8</sup>

The Talmud here is quite clearly setting out its hierarchy of values. In spite of the fact that within the culture of the Rabbis, it is the study of Torah which is the most highly valued of all practices, the Babylonian Talmud refuses to interpret Ben-Azzai's discourse as saying that a man should teach his daughter Torah, for the merit of having

7. I wish again to emphasize Brown's modesty in his treatment of Judaism and his invitation to specialists to correct his work on this subject. (See conclusion of my paper.) Another work of scholarship, which, to my mind, too uncritically reproduces the dominant ideology of the texts without examining the oppositional discourses within them, is Archer (1983). This article is otherwise quite useful.

8. For another possibility for interpreting this last phrase, see below. It is this kind of text which provides the evidence for Judith Plaskow's statement, "Women are objects of the law but neither its creators nor agents. Halakhot concerning the religious sphere assume a world in which women are 'enablers'. Women create the preconditions for men and male children to worship and study Torah, but women cannot do these things themselves without becoming less effective in their relational role" (Plaskow 1990: 63).

studied will protect her in her moment of trial. Had they taken this simple path, the entire effort to find an interpretation for the merit which mitigates would have been obviated. However, clearly they have interpreted him to mean that a man should teach his daughter only so much Torah as will enable her to know that, upon drinking the Bitter Water, performance of commandments will protect her. The upshot of this Talmud's refusal to entertain a simple reading of Ben-Azzai forces it ultimately into displacing the merit of the daughter entirely from her own study of Torah to that merit accrued from supporting her husband and male children in their study.<sup>9</sup>

Now, it is very important to note that even had the Talmud adopted the path of reading Ben-Azzai in accordance with the interpretation I have suggested, this would *not* have obligated the talmudic rabbis to adopt his view. The alternative view of R. Eliezer is there for the taking, and there was, furthermore, ample support for such an anti-theoretical position in other authoritative texts. The move of interpreting a passage and then rejecting its authority for religious law is, moreover, a very common one in the Talmuds. The Palestinian Talmud, in its treatment of this Mishna, follows exactly this "normal" talmudic practice:

*Mishna:* Ben-Azzai said, "A man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah, so that if she drinks [the bitter water], she will know—for merit mitigates."

In contrast to the Babylonian, the Palestinian Talmud comments directly on Ben-Azzai:

*Palestinian Talmud:* R. El'azar Ben-Azariah's opinion contradicts Ben-Azzai, for it is taught that there was an incident in which R. Yohanan ben Broka and R. El'azar Hasma were on their way from Yavne to Lydda and they went to visit R. Yehoshua in Peki'in. He asked them what was innovated in the House of Study today? They answered, We are all your disciples and

9. It should be emphasized that the Babylonian Talmud *never* directly addresses Ben-Azzai at all, and this is a major premise of my argument. One could argue, therefore, that the rabbis have interpreted Ben-Azzai to mean that there is merit for women in study of Torah and have rejected his view, and that it is only the authoritative position (of the first speaker in the Mishna) that "merit mitigates," which is being interpreted here to mean women's having no merit in the study of Torah. However, in discussing the view of the Mishna's first speaker here, namely, the one who asserts that "merit mitigates," the Talmud, by dismissing entirely the interpretive possibility that it is the merit of Torah which stands for the woman, only emphasizes all the more its total suppression of the dissident voice of Ben-Azzai. Even if one wishes to claim, therefore, that the Talmud, in interpreting the first speaker, is not making an explicit claim about Ben-Azzai's meaning, such a claim is implied in the total silence which the Talmud maintains on Ben-Azzai as dissenting from this first speaker. Either the rabbis are ignoring his dissent or they are assimilating him to their interpretation of that first speaker; either way his voice is effectively nullified.



we drink *your* water. He said to them, for all that, it is impossible that there was nothing new said in the House of Study. Who gave the discourse today? R. El'azar Ben-Azariah. And what was his text? "Convoke the nation, the men, the women and the children" [Deut. 31:12]. And what did he say about it? 'Since the men come to study and the women to hear, for what do the children come? Indeed to provide reward for those that carry them.' Said R. Yehoshua, the generation that has R. El'azar Ben-Azariah in it is not an orphan!

Ben-Azzai's view is contradicted here by showing that a strongly authoritative counterview has been expressed. R. El'azar Ben-Azariah has stated that the only reason that women are obligated to come to the grand convocation for reading the Torah, which takes place once in seven years, is merely to hear the Torah being read and not to study it, as do their husbands. It is clear, therefore, that his opinion is the opposite of Ben-Azzai's, and no merit accrues to women for the study of Torah. By citing this authoritative position and stating that it runs counter to Ben-Azzai's, the Palestinian Talmud has effectively rejected Ben-Azzai's position as normative religious law.<sup>10</sup>

The dialectical move here is, as I have said, a very common one in both Talmuds. The view of Ben-Azzai has been rejected but, at the same time, interpreted quite straightforwardly, namely, that the father should teach Torah to his daughter because the merit she accrues by studying would be a defense for her. Indeed, were this not their understanding of Ben-Azzai, the objection from the discourse of R. El'azar Ben-Azariah would not be cogent at all, for it is dependent precisely on showing that the latter rabbi held that there is no reward for women in the study of Torah, but that they only come to hear it.

According to the Babylonian interpretation, even Ben-Azzai had not claimed any merit for women in the study of Torah itself, and therefore, R. El'azar's words implying the same point could not be used to refute him. Ben-Azzai is thus, in the Palestinian text, neutralized as a normative determination but not as a counter-normative ideological voice.<sup>11</sup> This dialectical move was equally available to the Babylonian

10. See next note, however.

11. Cf. Simha Friedman (1983), who reads in the exactly opposite way, namely, that the Palestinian Talmud is *more* extreme in its rejection of Ben-Azzai because it cites another counter-authority. This "normal" talmudic dialectical move is precisely the basis for my reading because, by countering it in that way, the Palestinian Talmud is accepting Ben-Azzai's statement into the universe of its discourse, while the Babylonian Talmud resists this move. The normalcy with which the Palestinian Talmud regards Ben-Azzai's position is also marked by the fact that, in the parallel passage of the Mishna where R. El'azar Ben-Azariah is cited, that Talmud casually remarks that Ben-Azzai disagrees with *him*, in perfect parallelism to its observation here that Ben-Azariah disagrees with Ben-Azzai [*Palestinian Talmud ad Hagiga* 1:1]. We see, once more, that while the Palestinian Talmud does not accept Ben-

rabbis, and indeed they have adopted this style in myriad other cases. The move which the Babylonian Talmud does make here is so much more radical in its rejection of Ben-Azzai, for it does not even allow the *meaning* of his statement to stand, not even as a rejected minority opinion. It thus erases his voice entirely.

The interpretation current in the Palestinian text and consistent with the simple meaning of Ben-Azzai's language allows us to understand R. Eliezer simply as well. It is precisely the logic of Ben-Azzai's position which he refutes. He agrees, according to this interpretation, that there *is* merit for women in the study of Torah, but he considers this an undesirable effect. While Ben-Azzai clearly considers protection of the daughter the supreme value, Rabbi Eliezer considers protection of the integrity of the Torah's test to be paramount. The knowledge that Torah protects, together with the knowledge of Torah which would constitute this protection, would remove a major obstacle in the way of her temptation into licentiousness, for she would no longer be afraid of the discovery of her sin and its punishment via the water ordeal.<sup>12</sup> On this interpretation, R. Eliezer is a quite straightforward and logical antithesis to Ben-Azzai. The Babylonian Talmud, by refusing to entertain the simplest interpretation of Ben-Azzai, is forced then into rather fantastic interpretations of R. Eliezer, such as the following:

Said R. Abbahu: What is the reason for the statement of R. Eliezer? As it is written, "I am Wisdom, I dwelt with guile [and knowledge will find in-

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Azzai's position as normative, neither does it find it so shocking that it has to be suppressed. Indeed, it would not be inconceivable to find someone who only had the Palestinian Talmud as a normative source deciding in favor of the view of Ben-Azzai. It should be remembered that, according to the Talmud, the very reason for the Mishna's citing rejected and minority opinions is to make them available for future authorities who could see reasons to revive them. To be sure, the Palestinian Talmud relates a story indicating how extreme a misogynist R. Eliezer was, but that hardly constitutes an argument for general approbation of his position since in that story even his son is astonished at his behavior, and R. Eliezer is typically regarded as an heterodox and extreme personality. For this reason, Brown's repeated citation of exactly this figure (1988: 118, 145) by no means constitutes an adequate description of rabbinic culture as a whole. Friedman's article is important for its documentation of late medieval and modern rabbinic authorities who ruled in favor of teaching Torah to women.

12. This is the interpretation of R. Eliezer's view accepted by R. Israel Danzig. It is, moreover, consistent with the view of another Rabbi, R. Shim'on, who says that it is impossible to argue that merit mitigates because then one would have vitiated the ordeal's validity as a chastity test entirely. Ben-Azzai is simply portrayed as more concerned with the fate of the girl than with the certainty of the test. In another portion of my present research, I plan to treat Ben-Azzai's complicated relations to women and marriage.

trigues<sup>13</sup> [Proverbs 8:12].” As soon as wisdom has entered a man [!], with it has entered guile.

Thus the interpretation of R. Eliezer promoted by the Babylonian Talmud<sup>14</sup> has the study of Torah as a *direct* cause of lasciviousness in women. I submit that this is a much less plausible construction of R. Eliezer than the one I have proposed above, for, while the one I have given makes R. Eliezer a logical response to Ben-Azzai’s argument, this one renders his remark only tangentially relevant to that claim. Moreover, it is a two-edged sword, for if the point of his observation is indeed that the study of Torah leads in general to negative moral effects, then why only in women? Indeed, Rabbi Abbahu’s statement only emphasizes this paradox, as my punctuation is meant to suggest. Everyone should be discouraged from the study of Torah—a consequence R. Eliezer certainly did not foresee for his discourse, nor one that R. Abbahu would have wanted to adopt either.

It seems to me fairly well established, then, that the most straightforward way to read Ben-Azzai’s discourse is the way that it was understood in the Palestinian Talmud. The fact, then, that any readings of this text which occur in the Babylonian Talmud and later universally adopt the other interpretation is evidence for an effort (conscious or otherwise) to entirely expunge the radical implications of Ben-Azzai’s opinion; and this in a tradition which is quite unembarrassed generally—indeed enthusiastic—about the existence of opinions dissenting from the accepted practice.

As an explanation for this phenomenon, I wish to suggest that Ben-Azzai’s utterance, while given in a context which is for us ambivalent from a feminist standpoint, was perceived from within the Babylonian Jewish culture as being “feminist” dynamite, a line of thought that would have been explosive for the structure of gender roles in the society and, therefore, could not even have been allowed existence as a rejected minority opinion. The ease, on the other hand, with which the Palestinian Talmud regards Ben-Azzai’s view, even while probably not accepting it as authoritative,<sup>15</sup> may be taken as probative evidence that a woman’s studying Torah was a less threatening circumstance in the culture that produced that document.

13. The word for “intrigues” in the biblical text, *mezimot*, is generally used in talmudic discourse to refer to sexual transgression. I believe that this association may be underlying R. Abbahu’s citation of this verse in a context where sexual license is the issue at hand.

14. Paradoxically, R. Abbahu himself is Palestinian, but that does not matter here since I am arguing for the ideological positions manifested by the editors of the two Talmuds, and it is in Babylonia that his view was preserved and transmitted, while in the Palestinian text it is ignored.

15. But see note 11, above.

The *Tosefta*, a major Palestinian text of the ritual law (redacted slightly later than the Mishna), speaking history inadvertently, provides us with further strong support for the suggestion that there was a fundamental difference between Palestine and Babylonia with regard to the issue of women's studying Torah. The *Tosefta* explicitly avers that "gonorrhoeics, menstruants and parturants are permitted to read the Torah, to study Mishna, midrash, religious law and aggada, but men who have had a seminal emission may not."<sup>16</sup> R. Eliezer Waldenberg, an important living rabbinical authority, observes that this text takes it as a matter of course that it is permitted for women to study all of these branches of Torah, and the only issue dealt with is whether they are permitted to do so in certain physical situations (Waldenberg n.d.: ch. 3).<sup>17</sup> The Palestinian Talmud quotes this passage from the *Tosefta* in its original form.<sup>18</sup> The question raised by Waldenberg is, given that this is so, how is it that the later religious law forbids the study of Torah for women? His answer is that this Palestinian source follows Ben-Azzai's view, while the Babylonian Talmud follows R. Eliezer's. As support for this connection, he cites the Babylonian Talmud's version of this very *Tosefta*, which reads, "Gonorrhoeics and lepers and *those who have had intercourse with menstruants* are permitted to study Torah, etc."<sup>19</sup> He argues that the Palestinian source has actually been rewritten in its passage to Babylonia, "since the [Babylonian Talmud] holds like R. Eliezer that it is entirely forbidden for women to study Torah and not like Ben-Azzai, it omitted the menstruants from that law and included only the men" (ibid.).

As we shall see below, it is this very text, the *Tosefta*, which also cites a woman as an authority in religious law. The menstruants who can study Torah in Palestine undergo a sex change into men who have slept with menstruants in Babylonia. Once more we have evidence, therefore, that in Babylonia any voice dissenting from the stricture on the study of Torah by women was simply interpreted (or in this case, edited) out of existence. Having proposed this context, we can begin to read the legend of Beruriah, the female Torah sage, as part of a significant cultural practice.

## II. The Legend of Beruriah

If we do entertain the notion that Athenian citizen-wives had at least certain kinds of informal power, we must also be clear that it was socially necessary for men not to acknowledge it—to deal with it at most indirectly through

16. *Tosefta Berakhot*, chapter 2, paragraph 12.

17. I wish to thank Sarah Hammer for calling this responsum to my attention.

18. Chapter 3, paragraph 4.

19. *Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot* 22 folio a.

myths of Amazons and through their cultural fantasies of rebellious wives in tragedy or comedy. (Winkler 1989: 7)

Running through the talmudic and midrashic literature are narratives about a very learned woman, generally called Beruriah, who is often portrayed as the wife of one of the greatest of the tannaitic sages, Rabbi Meir. In this section of my text, I propose to read this narrative complex as just such a “cultural fantasy” as Winkler has described, that is, an acknowledgment/denial of at least a certain kind of informal access to Torah study that women seem to have had, indeed precisely the kind described (and proscribed) in the previous section—studying with their fathers. Although we have no way of knowing whether or not such a woman actually existed, the stories about her are certainly significant in relaying some “reality” about the culture of the Talmuds.

The Palestinian text of ritual law, the *Tosefta*, cites two cases in which a learned woman made a point regarding ritual purity which was accepted and approbated by the rabbis; once in her guise as anonymous daughter of R. Hanina:

An oven . . . which was plastered in purity and became impure—from whence can it be purified? R. Halafta of Kefar Hananya said, “I asked Shim’on ben Hananyah who asked the son of R. Hananya ben Tradyon, and he said when they move it from its place. But his daughter said when they disassemble its parts. *When this was told to R. Yehuda ben Babba, he said, “his daughter said better than his son.”* (*Tosefta Kelim Babba Qamma* 4:17)

And once in the same text as Beruriah:

A *claustra*—R. Tarfon declares it impure, but the sages declare it pure. And Beruriah says, one removes it from this door and hangs it on another. On the Sabbath these matters were related to R. Yehoshua. *He said, “Beruriah said well.”* (*Tosefta Kelim Babba Metzia* 1:6)

These texts, whatever else they may be, are certainly highly marked representations of a learned woman. That is to say, they are an acknowledgment of the structural possibility within the culture that a woman could achieve such knowledge of Torah as to be authoritatively cited in an important question of ritual practice. As such, they can be read as part of the same social force that Ben-Azzai and the *Tosefta* cited in the previous section represent—a counter-hegemonic voice that recognizes the reality of *some* women’s intellectual and spiritual accomplishment.<sup>20</sup>

20. Goodblatt argues two things with reference to these texts: one, that they do not constitute evidence for the identification of these two personalities (Goodblatt 1975: 77), and two, that they do not constitute evidence for this woman’s or these women’s being learned (*ibid.*: 83). He argues that this is the sort of knowledge which a daughter would have had by virtue of being part of a rabbinic household. On the first, I am prepared to agree with the plausibility of his claim, but on the

In the Babylonian Talmud the legend of Beruriah, the learned woman, is also maintained. She is portrayed as having learned “three hundred ritual laws in one day from three hundred Rabbis” (*Pesachim* 62b). Moreover, she even teaches her husband, the great Rabbi Meir, a moral lesson by besting him at midrashic reading of a verse:

There were two hooligans in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir who were troubling him greatly. He would pray for them to die. His wife Beruriah said to him, “What is your view? Is it because it says, ‘Let the wicked be terminated from the earth’ (Psalms 104:36)? Does it say ‘wicked people’? ‘Wicked deeds’ is written! Moreover, interpret it according to the end of the verse, ‘And there are no more evil-doers.’ Now if the first half means that the wicked are dead, why do I have to pray that there will be no more evil-doers. Rather it means that since wicked deeds will exist no more, there will be no more evil-doers.” He prayed for them, and they repented. (*Berakhot* 10a)

In the light of such exceedingly positive contexts for Beruriah and her learning at every turn, it is shocking to discover the following narrative of her end:

Once Beruriah made fun of the rabbinic dictum, “Women are light-headed” [i.e., lewd]. He [her husband, R. Meir] said, “On your life! You will end up admitting that they are right.” He commanded one of his students to tempt her into [sexual] transgression. The student importuned her for many days, until in the end she agreed. When the matter became known to her, she strangled herself, and R. Meir ran away because of the shame. (Rashi ad Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Avoda Zara* 18b)

In the Talmud itself, all we are told is that Rabbi Meir ran away to Babylonia because of the “incident of Beruriah.” The Talmud tells no more. Our narrative is found only in the important medieval French

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second I disagree. Neither of these ritual situations is so common as to be what any member of a rabbinic household would have observed—indeed, they (certainly the first) are presented as unusual situations. Moreover, the first narrative internally contradicts Goodblatt’s claim. If the daughter were simply reporting the household practice, how come her brother had a different suggestion? There is even one version of this text (and quite an important one indeed; see n. 28, below) in which it was her *father* whom she bested here; that version, at any rate, would entirely forestall Goodblatt’s claim that this was knowledge the girl had picked up from seeing her household’s practice. The story suggests in both cases, rather, that the woman (or girl) in question had an understanding of religious-law principles which she could apply to specific hypothetical situations, and the text in both cases strongly marks its approbation of her knowledge, a fact that will be of some importance below.

On the basis of these two traditions, it is less surprising that the Babylonians regarded these as two stories of the same woman. In fact, I would suggest that the literary similarity of the two narratives suggests that they may be variants of the same basic story. It certainly seems from this text, moreover, that Beruriah was a well-known figure in the Palestinian tradition as well.

commentator on the Talmud, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, the famous Rashi. The story recounts an ugly tale of entrapment and suicide. Rabbi Meir, to prove a point to his proud wife, has her seduced and disgraced (not so incidentally disgracing himself and his student in the bargain). This aberrant legend about the behavior of one of the greatest rabbis of the Talmud towards a wife otherwise presented as pious, wise, respected, and loved demands historicization and explanation, and, to be sure, in both the traditional and scholarly literature, a great deal has been written about this text. Recently, a very powerful and moving feminist reading of this story has been published by Rachel Adler (1988).<sup>21</sup> I am in sympathy with the general thrust of her text and its reading practice (“Retelling it from the world in which we stand, we can see how character strains against context, how it shakes assumptions about what it means to be a woman, a Jew, a sexual being”), but I wish here to present another reading of the text, “retelling it from the world in which we stand,” but attempting also to learn more from it about the world in which it was told. The main

21. There is, however, one moment in Adler’s essay which I wish to directly dispute, namely, her reading of the Mishna text, Tractate *Avot*, chapter 5:16. Adler translates this text: “All love which is dependent on sexual desire, when the desire is gone, the love is gone. Love which is not dependent on sexual desire never ends. What is love dependent on sexual desire? The love of Amnon and Tamar. And love which is not dependent on sexual desire? The love of David and Jonathan” (Adler 1988: 32). Adler then remarks, “If Amnon and Tamar and David and Jonathan represent the two ends of a continuum, the fact that one end is represented by an incestuous rape and the other by a relationship presumed to be nonsexual does suggest a dichotomy between sexual desire and true love” (*ibid.*).

This seems a misreading of the text, and one with serious consequences for our understanding of the place of legitimate Eros in rabbinic culture. The Mishna’s text does not read, “All love which is dependent on sexual desire,” but, “love which is dependent on something,” that is, love with an ulterior motive versus “love which is disinterested.” The point of the comment is that love developing from the fulfillment of some particular need in the lover is not true love and will only last as long as the need exists and the beloved fulfills it. The story of Amnon and Tamar is, in fact, a very apt illustration of this, for once Amnon had raped his sister, the Bible tells us, not only did he no longer love her, but he hated her. The Mishna commentator R. Israel Danzig insightfully remarks that Amnon did not love Tamar at all but only himself, for it was only his body’s pleasure that he sought. This text hardly represents the talmudic culture’s generally positive appreciation of sexual relations between husband and wife as a powerful expression and enhancement of their love; there is even a rabbinic technical term for it, “the love caused by intercourse” [Babylonian Talmud *Ketubboth* 57a], a term that only functions in positively marked contexts, i.e., to indicate that only after a marriage’s consummation is there real commitment between husband and wife. After all, neither would we wish to claim the rapist’s lust as a model for a valorized erotic love. On the other hand, Adler’s comments on the homosocial aspects of the institution of *havruta*, that is, the practice of men studying in pairs, and the relationship of David and Jonathan as a model for it are very important and suggest lines for further research.

difference in principle between our readings is generated by Adler's declaration, "I call it a story, though in fact it is many stories from many times and many texts" (1988: 28), and the consequent conflation of "Palestine in 200 B.C.E. [sic] or Babylonia in 500 C.E." (ibid.: 29).<sup>22</sup> While Adler shows here a fine awareness of the distinctions between these historical moments, her intention seems to be to produce an account of the effect that the conflated stories of Beruriah have had on women and men in hegemonic rabbinic culture since the early Middle Ages. My hope is that by paying attention precisely to the differences between the "many stories from many times and [the] many texts," we will be able to generate a more nuanced and historicized understanding of the different readings of the signifier "woman" in different rabbinic cultures, opening up a space perhaps for new possibilities for the future. I will offer another reading of this text, taking it in the intertextual context of the legal discussion analyzed in my previous section. This has suggested a difference precisely between the two historical periods of Palestine in 200 and Babylonia in 500.<sup>23</sup>

The end of Beruriah's story, given to us only in the margins of the Babylonian talmudic text, as it were (but a very central margin indeed), is an extraordinary anomaly, not only in the presentation of her character throughout, but also in the presentation of her husband's character. In Adler's reading, anomaly is the very meaning of this text. In an insightful comparison of this narrative with halakhic texts which portray unrealistic situations as test cases for legal theory, Adler writes:

What do these surrealist situations represent if not a passionate attempt to capture some elusive truth by smashing context? Imagining Beruriah must be regarded as just such an effort—a straining for a more encompassing context, an outrageous test case proposed as a challenge to all contextually reasonable assumptions: *What if there were a woman who was just like us?* (Ibid.)

The ambivalence of Beruriah's story is read by Adler, then, as a single cultural unit representing that ambivalence as follows: "While it is threatening to imagine being ridiculed and exposed by a woman too learned and powerful to be controlled, it is also moving to imagine being loved and befriended by her. Thus the rabbis, in describing the domestic life of Beruriah and Meir, portray Beruriah as a feminine version of the ideal study partner" (ibid.: 32). The story of her downfall, then, is a solution to the negative pole of the ambivalence.

22. In context, she certainly seems to mean Palestine in 200 C.E., that is, the time of the historical Beruriah, and "B.C.E." would then be a misprint.

23. Goodblatt (1975) also argues for this historical difference, but in a quite different direction from the reading proposed here.



Moreover, the very intimacy of the relationship with the ideal study partner, when that partner is potentially a woman, makes it impossible for Beruriah to fit in, on Adler's reading. "Authority in rabbinic Judaism flowed through the medium of rabbinic relationships, and the rabbis could not imagine how to give Beruriah authority without including her in the web of rabbinic relationships—the web of teachers and students and study partners. And they could not imagine doing that without also imagining her sexuality as a source of havoc" (ibid.).

In contrast to this reading of Beruriah's story as a solution to a generic anomaly in the rabbinic culture, I propose to read it as an exemplum of a very specific principle, namely, R. Eliezer's statement that "anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her lasciviousness."<sup>24</sup> Beruriah is, after all, the very paradigm case of a daughter whose father taught her Torah. If R. Eliezer's dictum is true, in the way that the Babylonian Talmud understood it—namely, that there is an intrinsic connection between the woman studying Torah and sexual immorality—then Beruriah's fall into licentiousness is a structural necessity. Any other denouement to her biography would constitute a refutation of R. Eliezer. Another way of putting this would be to say that the same cultural forces in the Babylonian rabbinic com-

24. Compare the reading of Aliza Shenhar (1976), who argues that the story attempts to exemplify R. Meir's great zeal to prove the truth of rabbinic dicta, in this case, that "women are light-headed." That is, on her reading, the text is prepared to defame the wife in order to present a positive [!] picture of the husband. It would be a strange storyteller who imagined this story of entrapment as a positive one of the rabbi. My reading, namely, that the storyteller is prepared to defame both husband and wife to preserve the force of R. Eliezer's opinion, seems much more plausible. Cynthia Ozick has gotten much closer to this reading in her suggestion that "to punish her for her impudence, a rabbinic storyteller, bent on mischief toward intellectual women, reinvented Beruriah as a seductress. She comes down to us, then, twice notorious: first as a kind of bluestocking, again as a licentious woman. There is no doubt that we are meant to see a connection between the two" (Ozick 1979: 44). I wonder, however, why Ozick makes it worse by turning Beruriah into the seducer, rather than the seduced, and only the seduced after much resistance. See also Schwarzbaum (1983: 69–70), who argues that the story is a realization of an international folk topos, the best of women seduced. This element is surely part of the story, but is by no means enough to explain it entirely and certainly not its presence here. See Boyarin (1990). None of the interpreters known to me except Adler has pointed out the parallels between the stories of the two sisters, but she reads them differently: "It is no coincidence that Rashi juxtaposes his story to the story of Meir's adventure in Rome. The two stories share several motifs. In both, Meir conducts a chastity test. In both, female sexuality brings shame and causes Meir to leave home. In both, women are assumed to be solely responsible for sexual behavior, even when pressured, deceived, or entrapped by men" (1988: 103). I believe that my analysis of the *contrastive* structure between the two tales, and the way that the earlier one clones itself in mirror image, as it were, to produce the later, only strengthens Adler's points about how the story represents women.

munity which did not even permit Ben-Azzai's voice to be retained as minority opinion could not tolerate the exceptional case of even one woman learned in the Torah. The horror of her end, the extraordinary lengths to which the text goes, even defaming one of its greatest heroes to achieve its purpose, is once again a symptom of the extraordinary threat that the learned woman represented to the Babylonian (and later European) rabbinic culture, a power that threatened to upset the whole apperception of gender relations and social organization, and that had to be suppressed, therefore, by extraordinary means. The best context, then, for interpreting this legend is, in my reading, the discussion of ritual law, above, whereby the differential between the Palestinian and Babylonian texts is reproduced in the differential between the readings of Beruriah in these two traditions—in both she is anomalous, but only in one does she become a scandal.

In the rest of this section, I wish to deepen and extend this reading of the text of Beruriah's end as being generated specifically in the intertextual web of the Babylonian talmudic tradition. Although the story of Beruriah's seduction and suicide is only extant in Rashi's authoritative eleventh-century French commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, yet I think I can show how it was generated there and why it is not a fluke in Rashi.<sup>25</sup> The story of the production of this text will strengthen the connection between it and its hypogram, the saying of R. Eliezer. Beruriah had, according to the Talmud, a double, in fact, a sister. In the wake of her father's martyrdom for rebellious teaching of the Torah, the Romans condemned her to a life of prostitution in Rome. Beruriah could not stand the thought of her sister in that situation and sent R. Meir to Rome to rescue her. The Babylonian Talmud relates:

He took a *tarqeva* of coins and went, saying that if she has not done anything forbidden, there will be a miracle; while if she has done forbidden things, there will be none. He went disguised as a cavalry officer and said to her, be with me. She said to him, but I am menstruating. He said to her, I am burning with passion. She answered, there are many here much lovelier than I. He said (to himself), I understand from this that she has done

25. The story is generally regarded by scholars as quoted by Rashi from an earlier source or oral tradition. There is nothing in his text to indicate that he is inventing it. The text of the Talmud does refer simply to "the incident of Beruriah," as in other cases where the story itself is not told and Rashi supplies it. In nearly all other cases of this type, the earlier source can be traced. One is entirely justified, therefore, in seeing this story as the production of later Babylonian talmudic tradition. For discussion of this question, see Goodblatt (1975), Schwarzbaum (1983), Shenhar (1976), and Ben-Amos (1980: 66). However, even were this story proved to be a product of Rashi's time and place, such a conclusion would not materially damage my thesis since, from this point of view, Rashi's culture was a direct continuation of the Babylonian one.

nothing forbidden; anyone who comes, she says the same thing. (*Avoda Zara* 18b)

R. Meir, the miracle worker, performs his miracle (an allusion to the miracle performed for the innocent wife), and the sister of Beruriah is saved. As a result of this activity, however, R. Meir ends up having to run away to Babylonia. But according to another tradition, the Talmud tells us, it was not because of this that he ran away but because of the “incident of Beruriah.” That is all that the Talmud itself tells of the story of Beruriah. But we know from the Talmud something more of the story of this other daughter of R. Hanina. The Talmud asks what she did to deserve such a fate and answers that she would not have suffered had she not brought it on herself in some way. “R. Yohanan said, Once his daughter was walking in front of Roman nobles. They said, how lovely are the steps of this maiden! She began to be very careful of her steps.” As usual in rabbinic discourse, “the punishment fits the crime.” She wished to attract Roman men; now that is her “profession.” Now we can begin to construct the picture. This daughter embodied in her behavior precisely the rabbinic dictum that women are light-minded and lascivious. To be sure, she had a terrible experience, but by strength of character, she passed the test of R. Meir and, by miracles, was saved from her fate. Presumably, she lived happily ever after.

Her sister Beruriah’s story is the exact structural opposite. She began as the very antithesis of the light-minded and lascivious girl; indeed, she was interested from girlhood in the Torah and in wisdom. She is represented over and over as the embodiment of morality. When the time comes, she is also tested by R. Meir, but unlike her sister, she fails the test. The consequence of her exemplary life is ignominious suicide. Her story, only tantalizingly hinted at in the Talmud and told only in its margins, is generated by simply reversing the polarity of every element in the sister’s story, which *is* told in the text of the Talmud itself. One sister becomes the exemplum of proper womanly behavior because her father conducted himself properly, in accordance with R. Eliezer, and did not train her away from light-mindedness. The other daughter dies a wanton because her father (the same father) violated the taboo, submitted to temptation, and taught his daughter Torah.

My claim, then, is that this story is generated as the dark double of the sister’s story out of the matrix of the Babylonian understanding of R. Eliezer, namely, that there is an essential nexus between a woman’s studying Torah and the breakdown of the structure of monogamy, that a wife like Beruriah could not possibly end up beloved and befriended by her husband and that a husband like R. Meir, who would love and befriend such a woman, must himself end up an exile. The story of

the two sisters, one told in the Talmud and the other only hinted at but made explicit in the commentary, together form one exemplum, one paradigmatic case that illustrates and makes concrete R. Eliezer's dictum, as it was understood and experienced in the Babylonian Talmud's cultural field, that there is an intrinsic and necessary connection between a scholarly woman and uncontrolled sexuality. This point-for-point homology between the two narratives can be laid out as a series of structural oppositions:

<i>The Sister</i>	<i>Beruriah</i>
behaves light-mindedly (-)	studies Torah (+)
sent to brothel (-)	marries scholar (+)
passes R. Meir's test (+)	fails R. Meir's test (-)
rescued by miracle (+)	commits suicide (-)

The paradoxes of these oppositions, and the reversal of the usual expectations of reward and punishment, mark all the more strongly this narrative's significance as an exemplum of the danger of teaching a daughter Torah. But I again emphasize that this explanation for the story is intelligible only on the Babylonian Talmud's interpretation of the Mishna. This story is not told in, nor does it fit in with, the Palestinian interpretation, where Ben-Azzai holds that there is real merit for women in studying Torah. Moreover, even R. Eliezer's view, according to the Palestinian reading, is that there *is* merit for women in studying Torah, and that this merit would protect them from punishment for adultery, thus removing the very deterrent which the Bitter Water is meant by the Torah to be. On that interpretation of R. Eliezer, there is no *necessary and essential* causal relation between a woman's studying Torah and sexual license, and indeed, in the Palestinian texts there is no hint of censure of Beruriah or her father for teaching her Torah. She is certainly an anomaly in Palestine as well, but her halakhic opinion was cited as authoritative and her dicta to her husband on moral and religious issues quoted only with approbation.

On my reading then, the legend of Beruriah is precisely the sort of ambivalent, troubled acknowledgment/denial of women's autonomy, and intellectual achievement, as in the Greek plays or the legends of Amazons to which Winkler refers, although, to be sure (and this is important), it is not until the story's grotesque end is supplied in the medieval commentary that the denial which the Babylonian Talmud achieves in regard to the other texts considered is consummated with regard to Beruriah as well. It is difficult to find any historical context for these issues precisely because, as we have seen, the energy expended to suppress this autonomy was so great. However, the material discussed by Bernadette Brooten (1982) provides some help. Brooten shows that in approximately a dozen synagogue inscriptions from the

talmudic period, women are mentioned as having the title, “Head of the Synagogue.” This evidence has traditionally been dismissed by scholars too willing to take at face value the talmudic statements of the enforced ignorance of women in Torah. Brooten argues, plausibly in my view, that the evidence should a priori be taken seriously, and if the inscriptions refer to women with the title, “Head of the Synagogue,” it means that the women performed this task as well, and, moreover, that such a position implied learning (Brooten 1982: 5–37, esp. 30–31).

The relevance of Brooten’s work has recently been a subject of discussion. Shaya Cohen, a historian who accepts her reading of the evidence, has nevertheless argued that since the inscriptions come from the nonrabbinic communities of Crete, Thrace, Italy, and North Africa, they are not relevant for the history of that form of Judaism which achieved historical hegemony—talmudic Judaism (Cohen 1980: 27–28). In contrast, Judith Plaskow contends that precisely the evidence for nonrabbinic forms of ancient Judaism “leads us to question rabbinic authority as the sole arbiter of authentic Judaism,” and that “texts may reflect the tensions within patriarchal culture, seeking to maintain a particular view of the world against social, political or religious change” (Plaskow 1990: 45). I do not intend to enter into the theological questions involved here, but it certainly seems relevant to me to emphasize that these readings do bring those tensions home, as it were, locating them within the talmudic texts and thus the rabbinic discourse and power structure themselves. They certainly help to answer the questions that Brooten raises, “Could Jewish women actually have been scholars? Could they have had some say about the reading of the bible in the synagogue?” (Brooten 1982: 55).

The geographical marginality of the inscriptional data is disappointing, however, in another respect, as it does not help us evaluate the evidence presented here for any greater anxiety about learned women in the rabbinic community of Babylonia than in Palestine. Does this represent more or less Torah study by Babylonian women than by their Palestinian sisters? There is, perhaps, one piece of tantalizing evidence for the first possibility, however. In the very text that denies a woman any merit for the study of Torah, the conclusion is that her merit comes from “her taking her sons to study Torah and Mishna.” But this passage could, as well, be translated, “from *teaching* her sons Torah and Mishna”—in fact, this is the literal, grammatical reading of the phrase. In order to teach, she obviously must have learned.<sup>26</sup>

26. That is, we have here causative forms of the verbs for “reading Bible” and “studying Mishna.” This significant point was made to me by my colleague, Prof. Milan Sprecher.

This would strongly suggest that the energetic denial of any merit for women in the study of Torah which we observe in Babylonia, and indeed, the erasure in the Babylonian Talmud of the Palestinian remarks on women's studying, are more a "wishful" prescriptive determination than a reflection of actual social conditions. We could then interpret the evident threat of the texts which denote women's studying as owing to the fact that women did study in that culture, and it is this which explains the greater anxiety of the Babylonian Rabbis.<sup>27</sup>

Within a literary, cultural tradition, there are always forces contending for hegemony. This is at least as true in the heterogeneous texts of the Talmuds produced over hundreds of years and in two, separated geographical areas as it is in Shakespeare, where cultural studies also find both patriarchal hegemony and forces contending against it. The Babylonian tradition, with Rashi as its definitive interpreter, achieved hegemony in medieval and postmedieval Jewish culture. Within the ancient Jewish texts, however, there is also vivid dissent from the exclusion of women from the study of Torah. The texts we have read here, precisely in the differing ways that they suppress this dissent, provide symptoms of a cultural difference between Palestine and Babylonia, suggesting that, while in Babylonia it was unthinkable and terrifying that a woman might study Torah, in Palestine it was merely uncustomary and noteworthy.<sup>28</sup> I would claim much more than Brown (1988) for the possibilities of learning cul-

27. Indeed, seen in this light, the persistent legends that Rashi's daughter was a medieval "Beruriah" (moreover, without coming to any evil end) become highly charged as well.

28. I am not forgetting, however, R. Eliezer's misogyny, which is also Palestinian, of course. It is not my intention to reify either of these cultures into one monolithic position, nor even to claim that the Palestinian culture was anything like egalitarian, but only to surmise that dissent on this issue was better tolerated there. In truth, it is important to add another set of complications and systematic doubts here. Despite my remarks above, in note 25, it is nearly impossible to determine for certain whether Rashi's story really has a Babylonian provenance or perhaps a later European one. Another rabbinic authority, slightly later than Rashi, has quite a different understanding of the "incident of Beruriah." His tradition includes, not the "incident of Beruriah," but the "*precedent* of Beruriah," and the "real story" is that R. Meir was exiled for not listening to his wife on a point of ritual law! Furthermore, according to this same authority, it was not her brother that she bested in knowledge and acumen (see above, n. 20) but her father, the great scholar R. Hanina himself, which establishes her even more firmly as an actual halakhic authority (Kalonymos 1963: 31–34). According to R. Yehuda ben Kalonymos's tradition, then, the story of Beruriah is a decisive refutation of R. Eliezer's dictum. Is one of these exactly opposite texts the authentic Babylonian tradition? Or are both authentic Babylonian traditions—reflecting a point of social conflict within that culture? Or is one or both of them a medieval European product? Do they represent different cultures and power relations or, perhaps, only individual psychological differences?

tural history from the talmudic texts. We must very carefully tease out from these texts the different strands of discourse and counter-discourse which they preserve and suppress, and sometimes preserve *by* suppressing—complicating our reading of ancient ideology and not simplifying it.

The point has been well made that reading texts as misogynistic can in itself be a misogynistic gesture; conversely, seeking to recover “feminist” voices in ancient texts can be an act of appropriation of those ancient texts for political change. This does not imply in any way a denial of the patriarchy (if not misogyny) of the culture’s hegemonic practices. The texts, when read in the way that I am proposing to read them, not only reflect a dissident, profeminist voice within classical Judaism, but constitute and institute such a voice. This is manifestly the case with reference to the Talmud, which is regarded as an authoritative source for social practice by many Jewish collectives up to this day. As evidence for the effectiveness of the story of Beruriah in forming practice, I need only remark that as recently as in our century, her (Palestinian) story has been cited as a precedent for the empowering of women to study Torah, and that argument rejected by other rabbis, who have cited the legend of her death as counter-precedent (Waldenberg *ad loc.*). At present, we cannot correlate these differences within the talmudic culture with other cultural differences since the surrounding cultures of Hellenistic Palestine and Sassanian Babylonia seem not clearly differentiated in these matters, but nevertheless the legal opinion of Ben-Azzai and the story of Beruriah in the Palestinian sources are warning signals of the danger of reifying ancient Judaism into a monolith. The redactional level of the texts and their reception history may have a stake in convincing us that women were nonsubjects in the discourse of Torah study, but the reality seems to have been, at least partially, otherwise.

Moreover, this analysis suggests how careful we must be on all sides when attempting to characterize one cultural formation against the background of others in its polysystem. It is so easy to see complexity in the culture and texts with which one is deeply engaged, while seeing only monolithic ideology in the “other” cultures. The best antidote to this disease of cultural history seems to be the dialectic of scholars ideally as open to such dialectic as Peter Brown himself:

But an effort to do justice to the particularity of certain strains of Christian thought and practice should not be held to justify the systematic dismissal of the complex and resilient ecology of moral notions that characterized the Mediterranean cultures of the age; still less should it encourage us to ignore the profound changes in the structure of ancient society in this period. If renewed study of the actual sexual practices and attitudes of Judaism, in Palestine and the Diaspora, . . . render parts of it out of date, or set my nar-

rative in a more cogent social framework, no one would be more delighted than myself. (1988: xvi)

My current research project, *Discourses of the Body in Talmudic Judaism*, of which this essay forms a part, is an attempt to meet the urgent need for a study such as Brown envisions.

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