

Shulamit Valler. *Massekhet Sukkah: Text, Translation and Commentary.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009. x + 224 pp. \$157.50, cloth, ISBN 978-3-16-150121-0.



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Shulamit Valler's book is part of a mega-project under the editorship of Tal Ilan to produce the first feminist commentary to the Babylonian Talmud. In conformity with the series as a whole (and as outlined in Ilan's *Massekhet Ta'anit*[1]), Valler opens her study with a general introduction to her particular tractate, followed with selected Mishnaic texts related to gender issues, followed by the bulk of the work—selected Babylonian Talmudic texts of the same sort but independent of the Mishnah. The Babylonian Talmud serves as the cornerstone of rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism that informed the Jewish people until emancipation and beyond; hence it is a timely and worthy project. It follows on the heels of similar projects examining the biblical canonical literature for Jews and Christians under the critical lens of feminism. Perhaps the project will push Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others in Eastern religions towards a similar critical examination of their own canonical collections. To wit, this social revolution is now possible after a generation of effort produced a critical mass of feminist

scholars capable of putting the traditional text under such intense scrutiny.

So far an introductory volume, *Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies*,[2] in which Tal Ilan introduces the project, has appeared, as well as her own contribution in initiating this series, *Massekhet Ta'anit*. It should be noted that Mohr Siebeck is committed to seeing this project through to its successful conclusion. Special attention also needs to be paid to Ilan's earlier study, *Silencing the Queen: Literary Histories of Shelomzion and Other Jewish Women*. [3] In that insightful work Ilan demonstrates how the histories of women become neutered and effaced from their earliest known surviving sources until they reach their accepted and dare I say, acceptable, canonical status (that is, as non-threatening to the male editors, establishment, and hierarchy). This programmatic impulse of the entire project is best summarized by Ilan's introduction to the volume just mentioned (p. 8):

"Feminist readings describe the way gender works in creating the worldview of the society which produces the text under discussion. They argue that these texts say little, if anything, about real women. In order to discover real women, one must move from the first step of exposing the androcentric character of the texts to the second step, which seeks to displace the androcentric discourse by placing women in the center of a feminist reconstruction of the text. The desire to displace the androcentric discourse takes many forms. In a historical discourse, the feminist desire is to attempt at reconstruction of women's past (and lost) role in historical events. In various literary endeavors, the attempt is to discover the lost feminine voice. This can perhaps be done through discovering silenced voices, by employing the technique of suspicious and subversive readings. Sometimes it is possible to show that the dominant masculine culture has, in its major cultural texts, silenced any individual feminine voice. However, discovering silenced voices is a difficult endeavor, and can be very frustrating, because silencing processes can be very effective. Instead, all assumptions about the inclusivity of the voices these texts transmit should be approached with extreme suspicion. It should be assumed, on the contrary, that the voices that are allowed to be heard were raised in dialogue with and in response to other voices that have meanwhile been silenced. Suspicious reading requires an attempt to reconstruct the points of view and opinions to which our texts responded. Obviously the silenced voices include many groups of the losers in history, not the least among them being women."

Valler sets out to answer some questions which arise from our contemporaneous situation. Given the fact that many women today have reclaimed the festival of Sukkot (Tabernacles/Booths) from its exclusive male domination by building and dwelling in booths, by buying and waving the four plant species (*lulav* and *etrog*), what antecedents exist for such modern-day prac-

tice? Hence, three questions are examined: did women in late antiquity celebrate the festival in booths, did they wave the four plant species, and did they participate in the water libation ceremony? For each of these questions Valler gathers the evidence available in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sukkah and beyond, including the Mishnah, Tosefta, Yerushalmi (Palestinian Talmud) as well as the Babylonian Talmud. Her answer (p. 11) is also simple and straightforward. In all these three cases the answer is affirmative; that is, the evidence clearly demonstrates women's participation in all these rituals connected to the holiday in Second Temple times. This important conclusion means that the exclusion of women from all these rituals is a process that began only in Usha in the aftermath of the failed Bar Kokhbar rebellion. It also means that the Ushan attributions of positions taken, especially in material that is either not anonymous or which source criticism can attribute to a given sage cannot and should not be pushed back more than a generation or so, if that. Ushan attributions are probably meaningful and accurate and they mean what they say and say what they mean. Given the precarious nature of mortality, oral history (as argued by myself elsewhere) is especially vulnerable. As a result we should not look for much history or accuracy in material claiming antiquity beyond about the beginning of our Common Era. What Talmudic sources claim for Second Temple times therefore reflects not much more than its last 70-100 years. Interestingly this is about the same time as the Herodian period and corresponds to the beginning of the two houses of Shammai and Hillel, that is, the period of their illustrious founders. Valler goes well beyond Tractate Sukkah in her analysis of topics that arise therein—often gathering from a variety of sources what we know on topics that arise in Tractate Sukkah only incidentally (p. 13). Valler's work also contains a contribution by Christiane Steuer in an appendix (pp. 207-210) with a nice analysis of Jeffrey Rubenstein's symbolism of Sukkah.[4] Steuer also did

valuable work in gathering the Tractate sources (see the acknowledgment).

As a whole the work demonstrates that the method of such intense focus on gender results in new and fresh insights on women's involvement in the festival. Though the conclusions converge with results known by other scholars through other methods (sometimes not mentioned), they do provide a degree of independently derived observations and hence strengthen our confidence in the veracity of the results. All in all Valler's is the feminist voice of a winner in history whose involvement with the sacred canonical texts cannot and should not be silenced.

My only quarrel with this work concerns the relatively few places Valler turns to philological matters, for which the reader must open this book in order to follow the comments made below. This is clearly not her forte and she frequently errs in her interpretation. For example, on pp. 19-20 Valler claims that Harry Fox has Tosefta and Bavli name the tannaitic personality "Yohanan ben Hahoroni" in mSukkah 2:7 after his mother. This is not the case! Variant readings exist between the above original reading and Yohanan ben Haharonit for all sources mentioning this figure. Any references to the feminine form (ending in "it") are emendations of that text; there never was any original mention of the mother. Valler claims to rely on Tal Ilan, but she has misread and misrepresented Ilan as well.[5] Emendations, as is well known, always come because of motivation. If the reasonable explanation provided by Fox (i.e., since he was severely critiqued in the Mishnah he becomes "named" after his "Mother") is to be rejected one must offer a better one in its place, something Valler does not do (p. 21 n. 4). Valler fails to mention that after Harry Fox cites J. N. Epstein, he rejects his position on mSukkah 2:8 as mere conjecture lacking in any textual evidence from any of the Mishnaic manuscripts.[6] Pages 26-27 are apologetic and not a feminist critique; Valler claims here that the exemption of women

from time-bound precepts because of difficult times "was derived from the sages' desire to treat women leniently, rather than from a desire to exclude them from male domains." This "desire to treat women leniently" is precisely the "good for her" intention of patriarchy and male chauvinism. P. 32 n. 22 makes no linguistic sense as the continuation is in the masculine voice because the subject of mSukkah 3:10 is the Israelite householder; the problem is not the verb in the masculine form but the unusual word order of the subjects of the subordinate clause "slave or woman or minor" when we usually would have expected to find "woman or slave or minor." On pp. 60-62 Valler fails to mention that E. E. Urbach discussed her case and dismissed notions of any hypostasis for Shekhinah in early rabbinic literature (Tal Ilan's observation in *Ta'anit* on p. 269 that Shekhinah is original to bTa'anit 25a is correct but there is no evidence for the argument on p. 270 that the word has female resonance in the literature of the sages as already argued by Urbach. I hope to discuss this case more fully on another occasion).[7] Lastly, on p. 146 the number 318 is the numerical Midrashic equivalent of Eliezer, the patriarch Abraham's slave, and hence there is no indication of the old woman's status or wealth to suggest she owned many slaves--she may have had as few as one, an "Eliezer."

Finally one must note that Valler wrote her book in Hebrew and what we have before us is an English translation by Etka Liebowitz. The translation is generally clear and very few if any Hebraisms remain. One typo deserves correction (p. 183): the dittography "not support Rabbenu Hananel's explanation since the" should be deleted.

Notes

[1]. T. Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

[2]. T. Ilan et al., eds., *Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

[3]. T. Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: Literary Histories of Shelomzion and Other Jewish Women* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

[4]. See J. L. Rubenstein, "The Symbolism of the Sukkah," *Judaism* 43 (1994): 371-387.

[5]. T. Ilan, "'Man born of Woman...' (Job 14:1): The Phenomenon of Men Bearing Matronyms at the Time of Jesus," *Novum Testamentum* 34, no. 1 (1992): 23-45.

[6]. See J. N. Epstein, *Introduction to the Mishnaic Text* (Hebrew), 2 vols. (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University-Magnes Press, 2000); and H. Fox, "A Critical Edition of Tractate Succah with Introduction and Notes" (folio; Hebrew), 2 vols. (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1979).

[7]. E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 36.

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