

Women Rabbis and Messianic Judaism¹

By Rabbi Joshua Brumbach

We now live in a Jewish world where every major denomination within Judaism has ordained women as rabbis. However, some movements are much more open about this fact than others. Despite the growing numbers and the positive contributions of woman rabbis throughout the Jewish community, many still voice great opposition to women serving in spiritual leadership.

There are those who argue there is a moral and social imperative to grant women ordination even if it violates certain Biblical passages and *halachah*. I would argue that such an approach is detrimental to our movement. We must approach this issue from a balanced perspective. If critical readings of the Biblical text and *halachic* responsa do in fact warrant continued prohibition of women from becoming rabbis, then Messianic Judaism should continue its current position of denying women formal ordination.

However, the purpose of this essay is to analyze the possibility of women rabbis from a social, biblical, and *halachic* perspective. If open investigation reveals that the Biblical text is supportive of women in leadership, and if a critical reading of *halachah* also reveals nothing that would prohibit women from becoming rabbis, then I propose that Messianic Judaism should join the larger Jewish world in full support of the ordination of women as rabbinic and spiritual authorities.

Women and Biblical Scholarship

One of the most exciting aspects of modern Biblical scholarship is in the area of women's roles and status in biblical texts and in the ancient societies out of which these texts were produced.² This greater openness in scholarship has created a rather pertinent observation. According to Carol Meyers of Duke University:

Until relatively recently, virtually all the interpreters of scripture were men. Over the long centuries of Jewish and Christian biblical study, perspectives on female figures have been provided by male theologians, sages, artists, writers, clergy, and scientists. Directly or indirectly, this male-dominated interpretive tradition has affected the way all of us, female and male, read the Bible. My experience in teaching and writing about biblical and Israelite women has made me realize that when it comes to passages dealing with

¹ Originally presented at 6th Annual Young Messianic Jewish Scholars Conference, Beverly Hills, CA. June, 2007.

² Carol Meyers, "Discovering Women in Scripture," *Bible Review*, Aug. 2000, 2.

women, the traditional interpretive materials are often biased. They sometimes ignore women; they sometimes misrepresent them. Although I remain neutral on the question of whether or not such male-dominated scholarship intentionally distorts or ignores many of the female figures of the Jewish and Christian canons, I am passionately about the need for more balanced scholarship on gender-related matters.³

Women in the Tanakh

The book of Genesis opens with the story of the creation the world, and of the creation of humankind. According to chapter two, God decided that it was not good for man to be alone and that something more was needed. It was then decided that a helper should be found for him. However, “For Adam, a suitable helper could not be found - לא מצא עזר כנגדו (2:20b).” The term, עזר כנגדו *ezer k'negdo*, denotes one who is literally a helper of equal status.⁴ According to Professor Katherine Smith, the term itself in Hebrew does not give any implication of a lower status, as the term “helpmate” might in English.⁵ Rather, the Hebrew implies “correspondence and similarity.” The woman was created from man, creating the same species.⁶ That is also the reason why the woman was created from Adam’s rib and not from the ground. According to Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch, the father of Modern Orthodoxy, the woman’s body was built from one side of the man’s, and not from the ground, so that the single human being became two, thereby demonstrating irrefutably the equality of men and women.⁷

Although this paper does not deny or deal with possible differences that may exist in gender roles and responsibilities, this possible distinction does not however limit the role of women in leadership. There are many examples of women who served as leaders, or appear as central figures, within the canon of the Hebrew Bible. These women include (but are not limited to) Miriam the Prophet (the sister of Moses – see Ex. 15:20-21, *et al.*), Deborah (who served as a שופטה *shoftah*, a “Judge,” “prophet,” and military leader in Israel’s early history – Judges 4:4-5, 1 Chr. 17:6, 10; *et al.*), Ruth the Moabitess (who was the great-grandmother of King David), and the famous Jewish Queen of Persia, Esther.

³ Ibid. Meyers, 5.

⁴ “I.e. equal and adequate to himself.” WTM Morphology and Abridged BDB entry, *Bible Works* (2001).

⁵ Kay Silberling, “Position Paper Regarding Leadership/Ordination of Women.” Presented to the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues, October 15, 1993, 1.

⁶ Ibid. 1.

⁷ *Artscroll Chumash* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2000), 14.

Women in the Apocrypha

Extra-biblical sources from the Apocrypha also demonstrate women leaders within Jewish tradition. In addition to the apocryphal accounts of Esther, both Susanna and Judith also play central roles within apocryphal books. Judith, as described in the apocryphal book named after her, is another sort of Jewish heroine. She is a beautiful widow who is praised for her devotion to God, Jewish piety, and self-denial. In a heroic act, she risked her life to slay the enemy and save the Jewish people and Jerusalem from annihilation. Her commitment to the commandments of Judaism is repeatedly highlighted throughout the text, emphasizing the importance of kosher dietary laws, circumcision, and the abhorrence of intermarriage.

Susanna, which was originally an apocryphal addition to the canonical book of Daniel, contains the story of another central female figure, Susanna.⁸ As a good Jewish heroine, she is described as one who feared the Lord, and as “a woman of great refinement and beautiful in appearance” (Susanna, v. 31). Overcoming the lure of an attempted seduction, she is credited with being faithful to not only her husband, but to God.

The apocryphal accounts of Susanna and Judith, as well as the martyred woman with seven sons in the books of Maccabees, all serve to further demonstrate the acceptance of women as central figures during the Second Temple period.⁹ The Jewish compilers and readers who accepted these books as *holy writ* apparently had no problem with the central figures of these books being women. For Jewish audiences in the Second temple period, it seems that exceptional women serving in leadership roles were viewed as acceptable, even if it was not a majority rule.

Women in the New Testament

Women also play a central role within the New Testament, serving as disciples, congregational leaders, teachers, prophets, and even apostles.¹⁰ This is true both within the standard canonical scriptures as well as extra-biblical writings.

⁸ See introduction to Susanna, *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 179.

⁹ Ibid. Meyers.

¹⁰ Ibid. Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 78.

Yeshua and Women

According to the Gospels, women were part of the wider core of disciples who traveled around with Yeshua and the Twelve, assisting in Yeshua's work and ministry. Also included within these descriptions are influential women who supported Yeshua's work financially:

With him were the Twelve, and a number of women who had been healed from evil spirits and illnesses – Miriam (called Magdalit), from whom seven demons had gone out; Yohanah the wife of Herod's finance minister Kuza, Susanna; and many other women who drew on their own wealth to help him (Luke 8:1-3).

The Gospel of Mark also refers to these influential women in his description of the crucifixion:

There were women looking on from a distance ... these women had followed him and helped him when he was in Galilee. And many other women were there who had come up with him to Jerusalem (Mark 15:40-41).

Although no women are included among the primary Twelve, women are still described as being part of Yeshua's circle of disciples. Furthermore, women also played central roles within the narratives of the Gospels themselves. For example, all four Gospels record that it was to women whom Yeshua first revealed himself after his resurrection.¹¹ Additionally, other figures and narratives where women play central roles include Yeshua's mother Miriam, her cousin Elizabeth and the birth of John the Immerser, the women with the issue of blood,¹² the healing of Jairus's daughter,¹³ Ruth and Rahab, who are included in Yeshua's lineage,¹⁴ the woman with the demon-possessed daughter,¹⁵ the widow at the Temple,¹⁶ among many, many others.

Paul and Women

Paul the Apostle, an early leader of the fledgling movement of Yeshua followers, is best known for his work in bringing the salvific message of Yeshua to a non-Jewish audience. He is also attributed with having written a large portion of the books in the New Testament. Interestingly, it is also Paul who is often cited as the most vocal opponent to women in

¹¹ See Matthew 28, Mark 15 and 16, Luke 24, and John 20.

¹² See Mt. 9:20-31, Mk. 5:24-30, and Luke 8:40-48.

¹³ Mark 5:35-43 and Luke 8:40-41, 49-56.

¹⁴ Matthew 1:5.

¹⁵ Mark 7:25-30.

¹⁶ Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4.

leadership. To support this position, opponents often highlight two specific passages (1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12). From an initial reading, these two portions do seem to support a position that would be against women in leadership. However, a much closer reading of these two texts, their historical and linguistic context, as well as Paul's support and encouragement of women leaders elsewhere in other passages may dispel the logic behind such claims. Since these two portions are the two most often quoted in opposition to women in spiritual leadership, to these we will turn our attention.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Let your women keep silent in the congregations, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the Torah also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in the congregation (1 Cor. 14:34-35).

The phrase "to speak" in Greek, λαλεῖν – *laleo*, can also mean to "babble or chatter."¹⁷ In this case, it may be possible that Paul is addressing learners in the congregation rather than a teacher. This understanding would then go along with verse 35, which states "if they want to *learn* something, let them ask their husbands at home." The possibility that Paul might be addressing learners rather than teachers would also harmonize with passages in Acts and Paul's letters in support of women leaders and co-workers. For example, if this passage was in fact a statement against women speaking in the congregation, then it would also seem to contradict Paul's own words in 1 Corinthians 11:5 about women praying and prophesying in the community. According to 11:5, if women were not allowed to pray and prophesy in public, then why would it matter whether their heads were covered or not while doing so?

Furthermore, this passage from 1 Corinthians 14 is hotly debated among scholars as to whether it was actually penned by Paul or is a later editorial insertion. According to Charles Lynn Batten, of UCLA, and supported by many other scholars, this section is sometimes either left out or inserted into different places in extant manuscripts.¹⁸ The reliability of this verse is even questioned in the footnote to this passage in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.¹⁹ Therefore,

¹⁷ Ibid. Silberling, "Gender and Ordination," 78.

¹⁸ Charles Lynn Batten. Class Lecture. "The English Bible as Literature: The Apocrypha (Winter 2006), UCLA, 4 Dec. 2006; see also the footnote to this passage in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1994), 245.

¹⁹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1994), 245.

it is possible that this passage was not part of the original letter, but inserted at a later date. But even if it was originally penned by Paul, it may not be a slam dunk against women serving in spiritual leadership when analyzed further.

2 Timothy 2:11-12

The second passage often raised in opposition to women in leadership is from Paul's first letter to his young assistant Timothy:

Let a woman learn in peace, fully submitted; for I do not permit a woman to teach a man or exercise authority over him; rather, she is to remain at peace (1 Timothy 2:11-12).

The Greek term used, *αυθεντειν* – *authenteo*, “to exercise authority” is only used this one time in the entire New Covenant.²⁰ Therefore its precise meaning is slightly ambiguous. The verb may be better understood as “to domineer over” someone.²¹ According to Katherine Smith, this “is an extremely negative term for authority, contrasted with the positive term, *εζουσια* [*edzousia*], which is commonly used to refer to proper authority.”²² This verse seems to not be arguing against a woman leader who is exercising proper authority, but rather only against domineering or usurping authority. Therefore, this passage, like our earlier passage, may not actually forbid women from serving in leadership roles alongside or over men if done so in an appropriate manner. Therefore it is imperative that we further weigh these two verses with other passages Paul has to say about women in spiritual leadership in an attempt to get a more balanced perspective.

Colossians 3:18 and Ephesians 5:22

A note should also be made in reference to verses calling wives to submit to their husbands as these verses are also often used against women in spiritual leadership. However, according to Roy B. Blizzard:

[T]he Greek word translated into English as “submit or be subject,” is the Greek word “*Hupotasso*,” the definition of which can be found in Kittel’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume 8, page 39ff. The verb is not very common ... Kittel states that for a material understanding of the verb in the New Testament, its considerable range of meanings must be noted. In the New Testament the verb does not carry with it the

²⁰ Ibid. Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 79.

²¹ I.e. “domineer”, “have authority over.” BYM Morphology and Barclay-Newman, *Bible Works* (2001).

²² Ibid. Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 79.

thought of obedience, to obey, or to have to obey, but rather to adapt oneself to another in love. He continues that the New Testament exhortation suggests that the general rule demands readiness to renounce one's own will for the sake of others, i.e. agape. In exhortation, the middle voice embraces a whole series of meanings from subjection to authority on one side, to considerate submission to others on the other. Its detailed meaning, in any instance, can finally be decided only from the context. I think that it is important to note that the correspondent to *Tasso/Hupotasso* in the Greek is a form of the Hebrew root, "*Kaf, Nun, Ayin.*"

It is important to note that in Hebrew KNA carries with it the meaning of humble. The root can be found on page 488 in Brown Driver Briggs, no. 3665. It is also important to note that in translation the word can have a double meaning, just like in English. A person can be humbled by being conquered or being subdued, but the idea, again, with both the Hebrew *Kanah* and the Greek *Huppotasso* is a voluntary submission or humbling of one's self by adapting oneself to another in love.²³

Romans 16

In the very last chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul addresses his fellow co-workers, ministers, and leaders. Surprisingly, forty percent of the names mentioned in chapter 16 are women.²⁴ Included in this list are Phoebe²⁵ who is describes as a Deacon (διάκονον) and worthy of any "help she may require from you (v. 2);" and Priscilla, a co-leader along with her husband Aquila.²⁶ Furthermore, one of these women, Junia, is traditionally understood within early Christian literature as being an apostle (Rom. 16:7). The position of an apostle was one of the highest positions of spiritual leadership within the early community of Yeshua followers.

According to Blizzard:

Junia (Ionia,-As,-An in Greek) is a name that is structurally derived from Latin and means "youth." Most dictionaries and commentaries note that in its form found in Romans 16:7, it could be either masculine or feminine, however, in examining the Scripture, it is probable that Andronicus mentioned with Junia, was actually Junia's husband and that both were relatives of the Apostle Paul and probably from his home town of Tarsus. This can be concluded from the usage of the Greek word "suggeneis," which is translated into English as "kinsman," but which principally means "one related by blood." It is also very probable that they had accepted Jesus as Messiah before Paul had, and might have been instrumental in his own coming to the Lord.²⁷

²³ Roy B. Blizzard, "The Role of the Woman in the Community of God," accessed on March 7, 2014, <http://www.biblescholars.org/2013/05/the-role-of-the-woman-in-the-community-of-god.html>.

²⁴ Ibid. Silberling, "Gender and Ordination." See footnote on p. 78.

²⁵ Romans 16:1.

²⁶ Romans 16:3.

²⁷ Ibid. Blizzard.

Apparently later Christian figures had a problem with understanding Junia as a woman. This is most apparent in the way most of our English translations today render the name in English as the masculine *Junius*, instead of its feminine Greek form, *Junia*. Professor Katherine Smith, of Azusa Pacific University, points out:

The masculine name, Junius, as translated in most bibles, is not found in a single extant manuscript. All contain the feminine name, Junia, which was a common, and well-attested, name in the ancient world ... In fact, the Church fathers; through John Chrysostom (4th century) all recognized that Junia was a woman. It was not until the fourteenth century, with Aegidius of Rome, that Junia got a sex change.²⁸

In commenting on Romans 16:7, the fourth-century bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (347-407) writes:

"To be an apostle is something great! But to be outstanding among the apostles - just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle (*In ep. Ad Romanos* 31.2)."

Chrysostom was not alone in confirming the gender of Junia. Other early Christian commentators include Origen of Alexander (185-253), Jerome (340-419), Hatto of Vercelli (924-961), Theophylact (1050-1108), and Peter Abelar (1079-1142). The gender of Junia and her identification as an apostle was well attested to in the early centuries of the Christian Church.

Women played a pivotal role in the development and growth of the early Jesus movement and their involvement is demonstrated throughout the canonical New Testament. Furthermore, textual evidence of women serving in prominent positions within early Christianity support this claim. Blizzard also adds, "it is striking that several early Christian women leaders were Jewish; the apostle Junia (Romans 16:7), the teacher and missionary Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18:26; Romans 16:3,4; 1st Corinthians 16, 19; Timothy 4:19; note in Acts 18:26, she teaches in a synagogue context), and possibly the Miriam of Romans 16:6, "who labored much for you."²⁹

Therefore, the numerous passages that support women in spiritual leadership seem to counterweigh a reading that would oppose women in ministry.

New Testament Apocrypha and Early Christian Tradition

²⁸ Ibid. Silberling, "Position paper regarding Leadership/Ordination of Women," 6-7.

²⁹ Ibid. Blizzard.

Within the extra-biblical books of the Acts of the Apostles is the book of Thecla, named after its central female figure. Thecla is probably one of the most notable New Testament apocryphal figures aside from the twelve apostles and Paul. Thecla is a legendary woman who became a convert to the “Christian faith” through the work of Paul. According to Bart Ehrman, Thecla “became an enormously important saint and object of devotion, especially for women, down through the Middle Ages.”³⁰ What separates Thecla from other extra-biblical female figures is that she is not just a heroine of morality and Jewish continuity, but is given the full authorization of Paul to fully participate in ministry as an apostle (see especially logions 40-43). In logion 41, Paul gave her the instruction to “Go and teach the word of God.” The text concludes with the description of Thecla going out and teaching, and “enlightening many with the word of God.”

The influence and importance of Thecla on early Christianity cannot be underestimated. As mentioned earlier by Ehrman, veneration of Thecla as a saint continued well into the Middle Ages. Although this inclusion and openness toward women within Christianity would later change drastically, the earliest years of Christianity were somewhat open to the active inclusion of women.

Women in Early Judaism as Supported by Contemporary Scholarship

During the Second Temple period in ancient Israel, women were able to actively participate within society, both socially and religiously. Women served as leaders of synagogues, participated in ritual services, learned and taught Jewish law, were counted in a *minyan*, and from archaeological evidence, do not seem to have been physically separated from men during prayer. There was active participation in most facets of Jewish ritual life. According to Shmuel Safrai:

In the Second Temple period women were religiously the equals of men: ancient Jewish sources from the land of Israel and from the Diaspora show that women frequented the synagogue and studied in the *beit midrash* (study hall). Women could be members of the quorum of ten needed to say the “Eighteen Benedictions”... and like men, women were permitted to say “Amen” in response to the priestly blessing.³¹

³⁰ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 113.

³¹ Shmuel Safrai, “Were Women Segregated in the Ancient Synagogue.” *Jerusalem Perspective*, July-Sept. 1997, 34.

Women were also not necessarily separated from men in the synagogue. This is the result of no apparent archaeological evidence from any of the numerous synagogues that have been excavated that would seem to indicate men and women were required to sit separately. Archaeologist Zeev Weiss, of Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has noted, “By now it is widely accepted among scholars that synagogues from the early centuries of the Common Era did not have a separate women’s section. This might surprise people whose knowledge of Jewish synagogues derives from contemporary Orthodox or pre-Second World War European examples.”³²

This scholarly assumption is supported by Safrai, who comments, “Rabbinic sources mention various functions for synagogue balconies and upper rooms, but there is never a connection made between these structures and women.”³³ The first reference to a *mechitza* is connected to Abaye (4th Cent. CE) in the Babylonian Talmud (*Kiddushin* 81a). However, according to many other opinions, this is unrelated to the synagogue.³⁴ As a result of recent scholarly insight into this subject, any kind of inference of women’s inferiority and inability to be a spiritual leader based on supposed separation during prayer is not supported by archaeological or textual evidence.

Inscriptions discovered in ancient synagogues from the early centuries also testify to women having served in various leadership capacities throughout the Jewish world. These inscriptions include heads of synagogues (*αρχισυναγωγος*), leaders (*αρχηγισσα*), and elders (*πρεσβυτερα* and other parallels).³⁵ These inscriptions (in feminine conjugations) bear witness to the very public roles of women, thus further proving that women were indeed active members within their spiritual communities.

Such a positive outlook on women is found both within the standard canonical scriptures and extra-biblical writings. Although women’s roles became more traditionally subservient to men, with a greater limitation on their ability to fully participate, this was not always the case. There was a time when women were able to participate to a much higher degree within religious life, both in Judaism and in Christianity.

³² Zeev Weiss, “The Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic.” *Biblical Archaeological Review* (Sept./Oct. 2000), 51.

³³ *Ibid.* Safrai, 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Safrai, 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.* Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 69.

A Thought Regarding Halachah

Before we proceed with discussing women in Jewish law, a caveat should be made in regard to *halachah* in general and of the *halachic* process. If Messianic Judaism claims to be a Judaism, than it behooves us to consider the place of *halachah* in our midst. Messianic Judaism is more than just a “Biblical Judaism.”³⁶ To make such a claim denies the history of the Jewish people over the last two-thousand years, and the fact that other forms of Judaism are also “Biblical.”³⁷ Such a perspective also fails to acknowledge the role Rabbinic Judaism has played in determining Jewish life, teaching and practice, as well as the preservation of us as a people throughout recent history. Although this discussion falls outside the realms of this paper, this point must at least be raised before proceeding. We should understand *halachah* for what it is, and what it is not. What has been lost in the strictest forms of Orthodox Judaism in recent years is the fluidity of the *halachic* structure and the innovation out of which it was birthed. Gordon Tucker, of the Jewish Theological Seminary, helps to point out:

The body of Jewish law is not uniform in texture, but is rather composed of materials which fall into two main categories, usually referred to as *de-oraita* (biblically ordained) and *de-rabbanan* (rabbinically developed). That which is *de-oraita* can be considered to be the very core of the system, which holds it in place and provides a frame of reference. It therefore must be treated as inviolable. Tampering with that which is *de-oraita* is tantamount to destroying the core of the Jewish pattern of life as it has existed for millennia...The much greater (that is, in terms of volume) overlay which is *de-rabbanan*, on the other hand, comes with procedures for change and development. What is *de-rabbanan* can develop, is in fact meant to develop, as the conditions of the Jewish community change. That is what ensures the vibrancy and the continuity of the *halakha* as the coordinate system which roots all Jewish communities.³⁸

Jewish law was never meant to be static, but rather to be reinterpreted in every generation. Rabbi Wayne Dosick describes *halachah* as “ever-developing” and “ever-evolving.”³⁹ *Halachah* is derived out of evolving case law, which is based on prior precedent.⁴⁰ As such, it is developed by wrestling with texts, the practicalities of daily life, and the teachings of previous leaders in order to decide *halachic* matters. It is a process. A process that is not set in

³⁶ A term popularly used around the Messianic Jewish Movement, see footnote below.

³⁷ For a much deeper discussion on this point, see: Mark Kinzer, *The Nature of Messianic Judaism* (West Hartford: Hashivenu Archives, 2000), specifically pages 6-10.

³⁸ Ibid. Tucker, 13-14.

³⁹ Wayne Dosick, *Living Judaism* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 95.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Dosick, 104.

stone, and not without inerrancy.⁴¹ However, while engaging with rabbinic texts and deciding *halachah*, Professor Tucker guides, “Development in the domain of *de-rabbanan* must not be abrupt or discontinuous, [but] must be rooted in traditional exegetical methodologies, and above all, must be ratified by the community of the committed and informed.”⁴² As a credible Jewish community, we as Messianic Jews are obligated to engage in knowledgeable discussion with Jewish law and contribute our own unique voice. At times we may interpret it differently, especially in light of New Testament understanding. Yet that does not mean we can just “do as we see fit.” We have a responsibility to ourselves and the larger Jewish world to engage in *halachah* through a knowledgeable and informed process.

Women and Halachah

The role of a rabbi as it has developed into the present day is not established in classical Jewish texts, but as Tucker points out, a role which has evolved through social need and custom; “consequently there is no specific *halakhic* category which can be identified with the modern rabbinate, nor with the currently accepted mode of ordination.”⁴³ Since there are no specific *halachot* that would forbid women *smicha* in its modern sense, the focus has been on specific *halachot* which a woman rabbi might encounter in her position as a rabbi which have traditionally been forbidden to women. Therefore, the biggest halachic obstacles often raised in objection to women’s ordination include:

1. Women are ineligible to be leaders within the people of Israel.
2. Women are exempt from studying Torah and from fixed prayer.
3. Women are exempt from observing time-bound *mitzvot*.
4. Women cannot be counted in a *minyán* – “Counted among the ten people required for recitation of certain public prayers.”
5. Women cannot serve as a *Baal Koreh* – “for they are forbidden to read the Torah in public.”
6. Women are ineligible to serve as *Edim* – (Serving as Witnesses in *halachic* matters, and therefore could not be eligible to sign *ketubot* (marriage contracts), *gittin* (divorce contracts), and other legal documents.

⁴¹ Ibid. Dosick, 93-94.

⁴² Ibid. Tucker, 14.

⁴³ Ibid. Tucker, 16.

1. Women as Leaders: It should again be noted that nothing within the Torah clearly forbids women from serving as leaders.⁴⁴ To the contrary, as briefly discussed earlier, there are examples of women serving and worshiping together with men in the Tanakh. This creates a problem. By the time of the *Mishnah* (c.200 C.E.), a social change due to Greco-Roman influence began to change the openness towards women within Judaism. The newly developed rabbinic structure needed a verse supported from the Torah to forbid women to serve in any leadership positions. The answer in their mind was based on one lone verse:

You shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the Lord your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not appoint a foreigner over you, one who is not your kinsman (Deut. 17:15, JPS).

Obviously, one would immediately ask how this verse concludes that women are forbidden to serve in a leadership office. The answer is that *Sifre* on this verse (*Shoftim* 157) adduces “a king and not a queen.” Based on this exegesis, *Rambam* (Maimonides) ruled:

A queen is not to be entrusted with power, as it is stated, “you shall set a king over yourself” – and not a queen. Similarly, with regard to all positions in Israel, only a man may be appointed to them (Laws of Kings 1:5).

This is the sole reasoning behind forbidding women from serving in any leadership capacity. And this position has become so entrenched within the heavily male-dominated rabbinic world that this precedent has continued to this present day. Just one example of how this understanding has become so concretized within the Jewish psyche is demonstrated by Rabbi Israel Zev Mintzberg of Jerusalem (1872-1962): “It is absolutely forbidden by the Torah to appoint a woman to any civil position of authority over the public, even if the entire community agrees.”⁴⁵

Based on this one verse, many religious Jews to this day still hold that a woman is denied *by the Torah itself* from holding any religious or public office. However, this is simply not true. The Torah itself says nothing of a women being forbidden. The existence of many leading women within the Tanakh (i.e. Miriam, Deborah, Esther, etc.) even disproves such a notion. Therefore, there is nothing in the Torah that specifically forbids woman from being leaders within the people of Israel.

⁴⁴ Simon Greenberg, “On the Question of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.” *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis*, ed. Simon Greenberg. (New York: JTS Press, 1988), 72, *et al.*

⁴⁵ Moshe Zemer. *Evolving Halakhah* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), 242.

2. Women Are Exempt from Torah Study: It is also supposed by the rabbis that women are exempt from studying Torah and from fixed prayer (*two things which women actively participated in during the Second Temple period*). Support for this idea is based primarily on Deuteronomy 11:19, which states that all of the teachings of the Torah are supposed to be taught to our children. According to *Kiddushin* 29b, because the text reads לְבָנֶיכֶם (*livneichem*) which is in the masculine plural conjugation, the rabbis argued that Torah should only to be taught to your sons and not your daughters. A possible problem with this understanding is that Hebrew uses the masculine plural whenever speaking of a mixed gendered group.⁴⁶ Usually when the Torah widely speaks in the masculine plural, it is meant to refer to both men and women.⁴⁷ Yet, this became the interpretation which has led to forbidding education to women.⁴⁸ In fact, the idea of women learning Torah became so vile to some of the sages, that in one opinion expressed in the Mishnah, “Whoever teaches his daughter Torah; it is as though he teaches her lewdness (*Sotah* 3:4).” This presupposition that women are exempt from studying Torah based solely on Deuteronomy 11:19 is a rather weak interpretation and in light of history, and most modern interpretations of this position, it is incorrect to assume that women are exempt from learning Torah. Therefore, learning and teaching Torah for a woman rabbi would not be forbidden.

3. Women Are Exempt from Time-Bound Mitzvot: In another presupposition, women cannot serve in a leadership capacity because women are exempt from observing time-bound *mitzvot*, and therefore cannot represent (Hebrew – *motzi*) men who are *obligated* (*hiuv*) to observe *mitzvot*. However, all of the *mitzvot* that are usually attributed to women, i.e. lighting Shabbat candles, *mikveh*, *challah*, sitting in the *sukkah*, attending a Passover *seder*, etc. are *all* time bound *mitzvot*.⁴⁹ Therefore, this assumption is quite weak and not true. This begs the question as to how the rabbis came to the conclusion that women are exempt from time bound *mitzvot*. This reasoning is based on the following presuppositions:

1. Women are exempt from studying Torah (already argued to be a weak excuse).

⁴⁶ Ibid. Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 71.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Simon Greenberg, 75.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Simon Greenberg, 75.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 73.

2. From the position based on Deut. 6:7-8 that it is the men who are required to study Torah and put on *tefillin*, the rabbis deduced that women are exempt from not only studying Torah, but also from laying *tefillin* as well.
3. The rabbis further concluded that the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* must be performed before 10:00 a.m., and is therefore a *time bound mitzvah*.
4. Since the rabbis concluded that women are exempt from laying *tefillin*, which is a time bound *mitzvah*, then they must be exempt from all time bound *mitzvot*.⁵⁰

According to Simon Greenberg, because the conclusion exempts women from laying *tefillin* (which is another discussion), “it does not necessarily or logically follow that they are exempt from all other time bound *mitzvot*.”⁵¹

However, even if we consider the merits of women not being obligated to observe time-bound *mitzvot*, would that still preclude women from *choosing* to observe time bound *mitzvot*? Many movements within Judaism today, including within segments of Modern Orthodoxy, recognize the ability of women to *choose* to perform certain *mitzvot* for which they would normally not be obligated to. This is recognized even by the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, which states:

Nowhere in the Talmud are women forbidden to perform *mitzvot* from which they are exempt, including the wearing of tallit and *tefillin*. A tradition is reported that "Michal the daughter of King Saul used to wear *tefillin*, and the sages did not protest" (b. Eruvin 96a). Maimonides and Rashi rule that women are permitted to perform *mitzvot* from which they are exempt, but should not recite the *mitzvah* blessing, since "who has commanded us" does not apply to them. Other sages even permitted the recitation of the *mitzvah* blessing.

The obvious reason for the exemption from time-bound *mitzvot* is a woman's need for flexibility in order to fulfill her traditional duties, especially those related to the care and rearing of children. In a society with large families, lower life-expectancy (and thus fewer non-childrearing years for women), and strictly demarcated gender roles, this exemption makes sense. In the developed world of the twenty-first century, the exemption is anachronistic (except, perhaps, in ultra-orthodox enclaves).⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid. Greenberg, 77.

⁵¹ Ibid. Greenberg, 77.

⁵² Standards of Observance – Prayer: 4.3.6, Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, accessed March 7, 2014, <http://ourrabbis.org/main/halakhah-mainmenu-26/prayer-mainmenu-36>.

Therefore, the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, as well as many other movements within Judaism, recognizes the ability of women to choose to perform time-bound *mitzvot* and do not see this as a preclusion to women serving as rabbis.

4. A Woman Cannot be Counted in a Minyan: Another objection is that since a woman's obligation to pray is different from those of men, it is argued that a woman cannot be counted in a minyan. Therefore the objection is that it would be inappropriate for a woman rabbi to be excluded from the *minyan* in her own synagogue. The guidelines of a *minyan* are found in the Talmud, in *Megillah* 23. The rabbis basically derived:

1. The term "Israelite people" which occurs in Leviticus 22:23 is equated with the Hebrew term *edah* (community) in Numbers 16:21, by noticing that the Bible uses the term *toch* (in the midst of) in both passages.
2. They further conclude that the term *edah* (community) refers to ten adult Israelites by interpreting the phrase "that wicked community" as referring to the ten spies who brought back evil reports from the Promised Land.⁵³

Mayer Rabinowitz, an Associate Professor of Talmud at JTS, concludes that, "the requirement of a *minyan* is, thus, based upon a tenuous connection established among three distinct verses – none of which is in any way associated with prayer or with a quorum."⁵⁴ Robert Gordis also observes, "The application of the rule exempting women from prayer in whole or in part is therefore a rationalization after the fact rather than the reason for its enactment."⁵⁵ It further does not specifically exclude women on the basis that it refers to the community of Israelite people. The term "Israelite people" is a generic term, and contextually, can refer to men or women. Because the reason of a *minyan*, and its exclusion of women, is now recognized as more of a bold *midrashic* move than something clearly set forth in Scripture, many Jewish movements now include women in a minyan.⁵⁶

Furthermore, even within movements which recognize the limitations of women's participation in a *minyan*, this ability alone would not preclude a woman from being a rabbi.

⁵³ Mayer Rabinowitz, "An Advocate's Halakhic Responses on the Ordination of Women." *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis*, ed. Simon Greenberg. (New York: JTS Press, 1988), 113.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Rabinowitz, 113.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Gordis, 53.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Silberling, "Gender and Ordination," 74.

Orthodox supporters of female clergy argue that a rabbi is not required to fulfill every duty but rather to serve as the spiritual head of the community.⁵⁷ According to Rabba Sara Hurwitz, an ordained Orthodox clergy member, “I don’t think there’s a 90 percent overlap [between a rabbi’s role and what women can do] ... There is a 100 percent overlap. The rabbi’s job isn’t to make the minyan. It’s to make sure there is a minyan.”⁵⁸

The New Covenant also alludes to corporate prayer in numerous places, and nowhere is there any mention of gender segregation. Additionally, as has previously been established, during the Second Temple period women were actually counted in a *minyan* and led *minyanim*⁵⁹ in synagogues.

5. Women Forbidden from Publicly Reading from the Torah:

The Tosefta, which contains supplemental additions from the period of the Mishnah, clearly states:

ת"ר הכל עולין למין שבעה ואפילו קטן ואפילו אשה (תוספתא מגילה פ"ג:מי"א).

The Sages taught that anyone may be called to read from the Torah; even a child and even a woman (Tosefta on Megillah, Chapter 23, Paragraph 11).

However, there is a passage that is often cited in the Talmud forbidding women from reading from the Torah, despite this permission in the Tosefta:

אבל אמרו חכמים אשה לא בתורה מפני כבוד צבור (מגילה פ"ב:ג).

But the sages said that a woman cannot read from the Torah because of the honor of the congregation (כבוד צבור) (b. Megillah 23a).

The issue raised here is a concern that a woman reading from the Torah could bring disgrace (i.e. not honor) to the congregation. Simon Greenberg reiterates the reasoning behind this position:

The Rabbis also prohibit a woman from doing certain things even though they are *halakhically* permitted to her because it would reflect upon the *kvod hatzibur*, the dignity of the congregation. Thus, even though a woman may be called to the Torah as one of the seven readers on the Shabbat [Tosefta, *Megillah* Ch. 3, paragraph 11], the sages nevertheless said that a woman should not read from the Torah because it reflects on the

⁵⁷ Sarah Breger, “Do 1 Rabba, 2 Rabbis, and 1 Yeshiva = New Denomination?,” Moment Magazine. November-December, 2010. Accessed online <http://www.momentmag.com/do-1-rabba-2-rabbis-and-1-yeshiva-a-new-denomination/>.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Breger.

⁵⁹ See further Acts 16:13-15, Rom. 16:1, Rom. 16:3-5.

dignity of the congregation. Considerations for the dignity of the congregation are given as the reason for prohibiting a woman a number of other things which she is *halakhically* permitted to do.⁶⁰

The argument that women cannot read from the Torah (even though there might be halachic precedence for doing so in the *Tosefta*) simply because there is concern about the “dignity of the congregation” is problematic. In the thirteenth century, Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg affirmed that in certain situations a woman may read from the Torah. As for the sages’ injunction “that a woman cannot read from the Torah because of the honor of the community,” he ruled that “where it is impossible to call seven men, the honor of the community must be set aside.”⁶¹

Further support for women reading from the Torah actually comes from Rabbi Joseph Caro (the author of the *Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law*) who noted that because “there is a rabbinic regulation that all those called recite the benedictions, a woman and a minor may read, even if they are first or last; and because they read they certainly recite the benedictions (*Beit Yosef*, O.H. 282).” In other words, Joseph Caro took it for granted that a woman may read from the Torah and recite the appropriate blessings.⁶²

Therefore, if there is no legitimate concern that the reader may not take the observance seriously, or would make a “laughing stock” of the congregation (*kvod tzibur*), than there is no reason for the prohibition.

Another objection to a woman reading from the Torah that is often raised and worth mentioning is the possible issue of a woman reading from the Torah during her state of *niddah*. The argument is that due to her state of impurity, she would be excluded from handling a Torah scroll. However, there is already halachic precedence set in the *Gemara* that would contradict this notion:

Rabbi Yehudah ben Beteira used to say: “Words of Torah cannot become ritually impure (BT, Berachot 22b).”

On this basis, the Rambam ruled that “all those who are ritually impure, even menstruating women and even non-Jews, may hold a Torah scroll and read from it, because words of Torah cannot become ritually impure (Laws of Torah Scrolls 10:8).”⁶³ As such, there is

⁶⁰ Ibid. Simon Greenberg, 84.

⁶¹ Ibid. Zemer, 277.

⁶² Ibid. Zemer, 278.

⁶³ Ibid. Zemer, 278.

no true objection for prohibiting women from reading from the Torah. Rather, there actually seems to be *halachic* support in favor of doing so.

6. Women are Ineligible to Serve as Witnesses, and therefore as Judges: One of the final objections to women rabbis surrounds the issue of *edut*, which forbids women from serving as witnesses:⁶⁴

So here with regard to testimony, the meaning is to permit two men, but not women or children. Thus we have learned that a woman does not judge or give testimony in court (TY, *Sanhedrin* 3:9).

Therefore the reasoning is that a woman rabbi would not be able to be a witness to *halachic* matters. This would include serving as a witness and signing a *ketubah* at a wedding, or signing *gittin*, contracts of divorce. Such a prohibition would certainly preclude woman from ordination.⁶⁵ However, it seems that there is no clear biblical or strong *halachic* precedence truly set for this. According to Mayer Rabinowitz:

While the prohibition was generally accepted, its origin or source was not clear. Perhaps this is why the Rambam wanted to strengthen the prohibition by stating that it was biblical [*Hilkhos Edut* 9:2]. The *Shulhan Arukh* simply states that a woman is unfit to serve as a witness without attributing this rule to the Bible [*Choshen Mishpat*, 35:1, 14]. It seems clear, therefore, that some halakhic authorities recognized by the tradition did not consider the prohibition against women serving as witnesses to be indubitably biblical...The areas from which they were excluded are those in which they were considered as not being knowledgeable or reliable due to their lack of interest or experience...The social reality was that woman did not fit the definition of *gedolim u'vnei horin* ("free adults"). This is no longer the case. Contemporary women have careers, are involved in all kinds of businesses and professions, and have proved to be as competent as men.⁶⁶

We may safely conclude that there is no basis for prohibiting women from serving as witnesses, and there certainly is no precedence for doing so in the Bible. The greatest example of a woman judge is Deborah, who served as a judge, prophet, and military leader during the period of Israel's tribal confederacy.⁶⁷ She most certainly had no problem in deciding cases and ruling on legal matters. Since the reasoning for forbidding a woman to serve as a witness seems

⁶⁴ Ibid. Rabinowitz, 117.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Silberling, "Gender and Ordination," 75.

⁶⁶ Ibid. Rabinowitz, 118-119.

⁶⁷ Ibid. Silberling, "Gender and Ordination," 75.

to have no strong support, especially in the biblical text, there is no reason that a woman cannot serve as a witness in *halachic* matters.

Beginnings of the Debate

Documented discourse of women becoming rabbis began in the mid 1800's. By that time, women were deeply involved in the Jewish community. Their roles greatly expanded as openness towards women increased, and as new opportunities arose. Women began serving as leaders of Jewish organizations, serving on synagogue boards, and becoming Jewish educators – teaching cultural and religious topics. The introduction of the Jewish confirmation ceremony to America also helped to involve Jewish women. By 1846, confirmations that included girls were first introduced from Germany to New York City, and soon spread to the rest of the country,⁶⁸ thus opening a new door in the world of Jewish observance for female worshipers, and giving them a glimpse of hope for future opportunities.

Rabbinical assemblies, which first appeared in Europe in the 1800's, began discussing issues involving women very early in their histories. At one of the earliest rabbinic conferences, convened in 1837 in Wiesbaden, various committees already began reforming religious instruction being offered to young girls, and began analyzing many of the laws affecting the status of women within Judaism.⁶⁹ At a following conference held in Breslau in 1846, Rabbi David Einhorn, one of the more radical Reform rabbis in Germany (and later of America), argued in favor of “complete religious equality of the female sex,” and believed that “the halakhic position of women must undergo change.”⁷⁰

In 1889, the journalist and Jewish communal activist Mary M. Cohen, stirred up debate with a short story which appeared on the front page of Philadelphia's *Jewish Exponent*. Within Cohen's fictional piece, titled “A Problem for Purim,” she created a female protagonist who dared ask the question “Could not – our *women* – be – ministers?”⁷¹ Through the remainder of the story, Cohen, through her different female characters, set forth in clear forceful rhetoric why women should become rabbis.⁷²

⁶⁸ Pamela S. Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Nadell, 14.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Nadell, 14.

⁷¹ At the time, the terms “ministers” and “ministry” were used widely in the Jewish community in reference to rabbis and the rabbinate.

⁷² *Ibid.* Nadell, 2.

Both in Europe and America, women were becoming more involved in professional life – emerging as doctors, lawyers, and successful business entrepreneurs. Within the Jewish community, voices in support of women’s rights continued to echo forth. By the late 1800’s, several women were even admitted to study at Hebrew Union College.⁷³ Although they were admitted into the rabbinical program, they were denied application for *smicha*. When Henrietta Szold was admitted into the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1903, it was “only after she had assured its administration that she would not use the knowledge thus gained to seek ordination.”⁷⁴

Enough support for these women arose to create a greater push towards women’s ordination. In 1922, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) passed a resolution declaring that “In keeping with the spirit of our age and the traditions of our conference ... women cannot justly be denied the privilege of ordination.”⁷⁵ However, a storm of protests from opponents kept this declaration from becoming a reality. Yet the call for women’s ordination would not go away. Although the ordination of a woman rabbi in America would not come about until 1972 (nearly 50 years later), the reality of a woman rabbi would be much closer than anyone at the time realized.

Regina Jonas: The First Woman Rabbi

Regina Jonas was devoted to Jewish education. Not content with simply being a teacher, she went on to study at the prestigious *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (College for the Science of Judaism) in Berlin, under the tutelage of such great Jewish thinkers as Rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck.⁷⁶ She devoted her thesis to exploring the Talmudic sources regarding women’s ordination. She was supposed to have been granted *smicha*, with the full support of the majority of her teachers. However, one Talmudic professor who declined to sign her rabbinic diploma kept her from fulfilling her ambition.⁷⁷ Finally, at the request of the Union of Liberal Rabbis in Germany, in 1935, Regina Jonas became the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi during a

⁷³ Ibid. Nadell, 61.

⁷⁴ Anne Lapidus Lerner, “On the Rabbinic Ordination of Women.” *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis*, ed. Simon Greenberg. (New York: JTS Press, 1988), 93.

⁷⁵ David J. Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc, 1998), 143.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Sarah, “Rabbi Regina Jonas 1902-1944: Missing Link in a Broken Chain.” *Hear Our Voice*, ed. Sybil Sheridan. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid. Sarah, 3.

private ordination ceremony conducted by a progressive thinking rabbi.⁷⁸ Rabbi Jonas served as a pastor, preacher, and teacher in the Berlin Jewish community. Yet often her role was limited to practicing in homes for the elderly and working with children. She later worked in the Terezin ghetto and perished in Auschwitz in 1944.⁷⁹ The memory of Rabbi Regina Jonas quickly faded from memory as no one who knew of her ever spoke of her, or the fact that there even was a woman rabbi.⁸⁰ Many tried to forget that she ever existed. Yet, she opened the door to future generations of women rabbis.

Women and Reform Judaism

The Reform Movement created avenues of openness quite early in the area of women's rights. As previously noted, by the mid-1800's issues involving women were already being discussed at rabbinical conferences.⁸¹ The first reforms dealt with the education of young girls and the scrutinization of *halachah* that affected the status of women within Judaism. According to Pamela S. Nadell, of American University:

Essentially, discussions of women's status within Judaism revolved around three central issues: ameliorating the position of women within the Jewish laws of marriage and divorce, equalizing their opportunities in Jewish ceremonies, and emancipating them in the synagogue. Initially much concerned the laws of marriage and divorce, many of which, by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, seemed particularly distasteful, if not disgraceful, to modernizing Jews, male and female.⁸²

Many of these issues still greatly affect women to this day in more traditional segments of the Jewish world. One of the biggest discussions in *halachic* Judaism concerns the issue of a woman who is an *agunah* (literally "chained" or "anchored").⁸³ *Agunot* (the pl. of *agunah*) are women who are unable to obtain a Jewish writ of divorce. According to Jewish law, if a man refuses to give his wife a *get*, a *halachic* writ of divorce, then the status of the women remains married. She cannot remarry so long as her husband refuses to give her a *get*.⁸⁴ According to strict interpretations of *halachah*, the only way for a woman to gain her freedom from her ex-husband,

⁷⁸ Ibid. Zucker, 159.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Sarah, 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Sarah, 3.

⁸¹ Ibid. Nadell, 14.

⁸² Ibid. Nadell, 15.

⁸³ Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 133.

⁸⁴ Ibid. Greenberg, 133 and Nadell, 16.

aside from a *get* would be to legally prove his death.⁸⁵ Aside from that, the woman remains in a state of *agunah* (i.e. “chained”) to her husband forever. Were she to remarry and have children, it would be considered a forbidden union and the children would be considered *mamzerim* (bastards).⁸⁶ Horrific stories abound within the Orthodox world concerning *agunot* who remain legally chained to their dead-beat and nowhere-to-be-found husbands. Such situations point to the dire need to critically re-read and re-interpret the Bible and *halachah*.

Other issues concerning women tackled by these early Reform rabbinical assemblies concerned forced Levirate marriage, and *halitzah*, the freeing of a sister-in-law by the brother-in-law of the obligation of Levirate marriage. By 1871, a synod of reform rabbis “agreed that where the secular authorities had declared a missing person dead, the widow could remarry. Furthermore, they adopted, almost unanimously, a resolution dispensing with *halitzah*.”⁸⁷ The rabbis also set out to create equality for women within the synagogue and quickly included women in all areas of synagogue ritual – including women in a *minyan*, allowing men and women to sit together, calling up women to read from the Torah, and the binding of *mitzvot* upon women in the same way men are bound to the *mitzvot*. In 1845, at a conference of rabbis held in Frankfurt-am-Main, a proposed resolution regarding the status of women was proclaimed:

She has the same obligation as a man to participate from youth up in the instruction in Judaism and in the public services, and that the custom not to include women in the number of individuals necessary for the conducting of a public service is only a custom and has no religious basis.⁸⁸

The roles of women within Reform Judaism continued to be challenged, and more and more the topic of women’s ordination arose. When women were admitted to Hebrew Union College at the turn of the century, and proved their mental competence to be equal to that of men in regard to rabbinical studies, more support continued to arise for women to be ordained. This support finally led to a proposal in 1922, by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) to pass a resolution declaring that “In keeping with the spirit of our age and the traditions of our conference... women cannot justly be denied the privilege of ordination.”⁸⁹ However, a storm of protests kept this declaration from becoming a reality. It would still take another 50 years of

⁸⁵ Ibid. Nadell, 15.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Nadell, 15.

⁸⁷ Ibid. Nadell, 15.

⁸⁸ Ibid. Nadell, 17.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Zucker, 143.

debating the issue before a woman would be ordained within Reform Judaism. Finally in 1972, Rabbi Sally Priesand became the first ordained woman rabbi in America after graduating from Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion.⁹⁰ Like Rabbi Regina Jonas before her, she was setting a precedent that could no longer be ignored.

Women and Reconstructionist Judaism

From its inception in 1968, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College immediately began admitting women and training them for the rabbinate.⁹¹ Reconstructionist philosophy, like Reform beliefs, is founded on the basis that men and women have equal rights. In 1974, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso was ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College as their first female rabbi, and thus became the second woman rabbi in America.⁹² In 1977 she was hired by Indianapolis's Beth El Zadok Synagogue, which was affiliated with both the Reconstructionist and Conservative movements. As such, she also became the first woman rabbi to serve in a Conservative-affiliated congregation.⁹³

Women and Conservative Judaism

Stirrings within the Conservative movement regarding a larger ritual role for women began around the turn of the century. In 1903 Henrietta Szold became the first woman to be admitted into the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). However, she was accepted “only after she had assured its administration that she would not use the knowledge thus gained to seek ordination.”⁹⁴

The Conservative movement also discussion women's spiritual emancipation, but moved at a much slower pace. Almost fifty years after Henrietta Szold was admitted to JTS, the Law Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly finally published a majority decision in 1955 allowing women to be called up for an *aliyah* to the Torah.⁹⁵ Although the 1955 ruling legitimized the

⁹⁰ Ibid. Zucker, 159.

⁹¹ Nadell, 187-188.

⁹² Rebecca Alpert, in her preface to the North American edition of *Hear Our Voice*, ed. Sybil Sheridan. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), *xiii*.

⁹³ Avi Hein, “A History of Women's Ordination as Rabbis.” *Jewish Virtual Library*: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/femalerabbi.html>

⁹⁴ Ibid. Lerner, 93.

⁹⁵ Gordon Tucker, “Final Report of the Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis.” *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis*, ed. Simon Greenberg. (New York: JTS Press, 1988), 18.

practice of calling women for an *aliyah*, it was not a universal custom in most Conservative Congregations. Yet over the next 50 years, the custom of calling up women to the Torah has now become almost universal in the majority of Conservative congregations.

In 1973 (nearly 18 years after allowing women to be called to the Torah) the Law committee issued another majority responsum which permitted congregations to now count women as a part of the *minyán* for public worship.⁹⁶ The 1973 decision was adopted by the United Synagogue (the Movement's leading body), and a public statement was issued that included the call for the "admission of Women in the Rabbinical School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America."⁹⁷ These decisions too were not immediately accepted by the majority of congregations, but over time the number of supporters continued to grow.

In 1974 the Law Committee issued a *minority* report declaring that women should be permitted to serve as witnesses in *halachic* proceedings, which included signing *ketubot* and *gittin*.⁹⁸ Although this was a minority position, because it was signed by at least 6 members of the committee rendered it a legitimate option for rabbis and congregations within the Conservative movement.

Finally in 1977 a resolution was proposed to finally convene a committee to discuss the possibility of women being ordained as rabbis.⁹⁹ In 1980 the committee reported to the Seminary and then to the Rabbinical Assembly its recommendation to formally accept women into the Rabbinical school of JTS and to ordain competent women as Conservative rabbis.¹⁰⁰ In 1985 (almost 82 years after Henrietta Szold was admitted to JTS) Rabbi Amy Eilberg was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America as the first female Conservative Rabbi.¹⁰¹

Women and Orthodox Judaisms

In the last few years women have made tremendous strides within the Orthodox community – both in the United States and Israel. Yet, to this day debates still rage over issues concerning women and women's ordination. Although the various movements as a whole still do not openly accept the ordination of women as rabbis (and certain segments probably never will),

⁹⁶ Ibid. Tucker, 18.

⁹⁷ Ibid. Tucker, 18.

⁹⁸ Ibid. Tucker, 18.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Lerner, 94.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Lerner, 94.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Zucker, 159.

what is not often discussed is that in reality, several women to date have been legitimately ordained as Orthodox rabbis.¹⁰² Furthermore, there is historical precedent for this discussion. There are a handful of women scholars mentioned in the Talmud. The most famous of which is Bruriah, the wife of the *Tanna* Rabbi Meir, and considered a respected sage in her own right. Not only is she mentioned in numerous places within the Talmud, but she is respected for her knowledge on matters of both *halachah* and *aggadah*.

Another two women worth mentioning are Osnat Barazani, who in 17th century Kurdistan served as a *Rosh Yeshiva* and Torah scholar¹⁰³ and Chanah Rachel Verbermacher, known as the “Maiden of Ludmir,” who was the only female Chassidic Rebbe, who lived during the 19th century in Ukraine (and later settled in Jerusalem).¹⁰⁴ According to Avi Hein in an article he wrote for the Jewish Virtual Library:

Mimi Feigelson, a student of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach [and currently a Professor of Rabbinic Studies at the Zielger School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University, received rabbinic ordination in 1994 in Jerusalem] ... Feigelson, however, doesn't use the title “rabbi” out of respect for the current social structure of orthodoxy. Eveline Goodman-Thau was ordained in October 2000 in Jerusalem by Rabbi Jonathan Chipman [a respected rabbi and Torah scholar in Israel]. But the orthodox religious establishment has harshly condemned the actions of these women and others with similar aspirations ... In 1993, Haviva Krasner-Davidson (now Dr. Haviva Ner-David) applied to Yeshiva University's rabbinical school, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS). She never received a response. Instead, it has been reported to her that her application was ridiculed publicly. She is now studying in Israel under Rabbi Dr. Aryeh Strikovsky [and received *smicha* in 2006].¹⁰⁵

In March of 2009, Sara Hurwitz was ordained with the original title *Mahara”t* (an acronym for *manhiga hilkhaitit rukhanit Toranit*, one who is a teacher of Jewish law and spirituality) by leading Modern Orthodox leader and thinker, Rabbi Avi Weiss. However, the challenge was that there was no precedence for such a title and many people did not understand what it meant. Therefore, in 2010, in another ceremony she received the full title Rabba (a feminine form ‘Rabbi’). At the Orthodox Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, Rabba Sara Hurwitz is considered a full member of the rabbinic staff, where she fulfills all functions of a rabbi,

¹⁰² Avi Hein, “A History of Women’s Ordination as Rabbis.” *Jewish Virtual Library*: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Judaism/femalerabbi.html>.

¹⁰³ <http://www.jofa.org/pdf/Responsa%20on%20Ordination%20of%20Women.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maiden_of_Ludmir.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Hein.

including teaching, speaking from the pulpit, officiating at life cycle events, including funerals and weddings, and addresses congregants' halachic questions.¹⁰⁶

It should be duly noted, however, that women Orthodox rabbis do not function entirely in the same ways as their counterparts within the wider Jewish community. For example, Orthodox interpretation of *halachah* forbids women to make-up a *minyan*, serve on a *Beit Din*, act as a *posek* (a religious judge), or as a *halachic* witness. As such, women rabbis within Orthodoxy would not be able to participate in those particular roles. But advocates point out that there is much more to being a rabbi than just those few roles.

Many halachic authorities, both who support and do not support outright *smicha* for women, acknowledge that many of these other roles are not forbidden to women. As such, as Rabba Hurwitz argued in a recent article in *Moment Magazine*: “I don’t think there’s a 90 percent overlap [between a rabbi’s role and what women can do] ... There is a 100 percent overlap. The rabbi’s job isn’t to make the minyan. It’s to make sure there is a minyan.” She added that women can also serve in roles not open to men, such as accompanying a woman to the mikveh.¹⁰⁷

Support within Orthodoxy for further ordination of women rabbis is growing. Orthodox Jewish thinker and activist, Blu Greenberg, has noted, “Some highly respected Yeshiva University-ordained modern Orthodox Rabbis see no halakhic barriers to women’s ordinations.”¹⁰⁸ Although only a handful of women to date have quietly received Orthodox *smicha*, more are sure to follow in the coming years.

Women and Messianic Judaism

In May of 2011, the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC) passed historic resolutions recognizing the ability of women to serve as rabbis and that it would welcome them as full members.¹⁰⁹ But this was not the first time such a discussion has taken place. Similar discussions regarding the ordination of women have been stewing for some time. In October of 1993, Kay Silberling presented a position paper regarding the ordination of women to the theology committee of the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues

¹⁰⁶ <http://yeshivatmaharat.org/saras-story>.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.momentmag.com/moment/issues/2010/12/Feature-Orthodox.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Blu Greenberg, “Is Now the Time for Orthodox Women Rabbis?” *Moment* Dec. 1992: 50-53, 74.

¹⁰⁹ See the definition of a “Messianic Jewish Rabbi” and the FAQs section at www.ourrabbis.org.

(IAMCS).¹¹⁰ In 2001, Rabbi Dr. Ruth Fleischer wrote an article in support of women rabbis which appeared in *Voices of Messianic Judaism*, edited by Reform Rabbi Dr. Dan Cohn-Sherbok.¹¹¹ Also in 2001, Dr. Kay Silberling published an article supporting women's ordination that appeared in *Kesher*, a Messianic Jewish scholarly journal.¹¹²

Both the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) and the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS), which together represent the majority of affiliated Messianic congregations around the world, currently do not ordain women as rabbis.¹¹³ Despite this fact, like their female counterparts within Orthodoxy, there have been a few women within the Messianic Jewish movement who have received *smicha* through private ordinations.¹¹⁴

Contributions and Innovations of Women Rabbis

Rabbi David J. Zucker rightly notes that “Women rabbis have changed the face of Judaism.”¹¹⁵ With the introduction of women to the rabbinate, they have brought with them unique approaches and insights. The change toward more smaller and intimate congregations, as well as *havurah* groups, women's *Rosh Chodesh* study groups, and social justice committees have all been introduced, or heavily influenced, by women rabbis.¹¹⁶ In addition, women rabbis have helped to introduce a greater amount of balance, intimacy, and empowerment.¹¹⁷

Anyone familiar with ministry (which includes the rabbinate) is well aware that it can be an all consuming life. The demands on one's time and family are tremendous, and often it is the families of rabbis who receive the losing end of the deal. As a result, there is a dire need to create a balance between one's role as a rabbi and one's family life. With the influence of women rabbis, Rabbi Zucker notes:

¹¹⁰ Kay Silberling, “Position Paper Regarding Leadership/Ordination of Women.” Presented to the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues, October 15, 1993.

¹¹¹ Ruth Fleischer, “Women can be in Leadership.” *Voices of Messianic Judaism*. Ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok. (Baltimore: Lederer, 2001), 151-157.

¹¹² Kathryn J. Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” *Kesher*, (Albuquerque: A UMJC Publication, Summer 2001), 68-81.

¹¹³ A note should be made that while the Union of British Messianic Jewish Congregations (UBMJC) existed, they ordained women in all areas of leadership within their congregations. They were probably the only Messianic congregational organization to do so (personal email correspondence with Rabbi Dr. Ruth Fleischer, May 2007).

¹¹⁴ Note that in Judaism, private *smicha* from a recognized rabbi is just as legitimate as *smicha* from a recognized institution. The most notable female Messianic Rabbis are Rabbi Dr. Ruth Fleischer (of London, England) and Rabbanit Shirel Dean (of Portland, OR).

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Zucker, 146.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. Zucker, 146-147.

¹¹⁷ Janet Marder, “How Women are Changing the Rabbinate.” *Reform Judaism* (Summer, 1991), 5.

The need for balance is not in itself an inherently “gender-related” issue, and it has much wider implications and applications than merely the rabbinate. That some male rabbis are also seeking “balance” between their professional and personal lives is not in dispute. In terms of the rabbinate, however, it was women rabbis who raised the issue first and this is part of their enduring legacy to the profession.¹¹⁸

With a greater focus on intimacy, women rabbis have often chosen smaller pulpits where they can form a much closer relationship with their congregants, and where it is much easier to form a greater sense of community.¹¹⁹ Yet, there are also other factors that come into play in such decisions. Often, women rabbis choose these smaller positions out of desire for greater intimacy, and at other times out of convenience in balancing their personal and professional lives. However, sometimes it is not their choice. More often than not, many of the larger congregations would not be open to them. Although women have become assistant rabbis at the largest synagogues, most of these larger congregations still prefer for the senior leader to be a male rabbi. Will this ever change? I am sure it will, but only time will tell.

Finally, women rabbis are also attributed to introducing to the Jewish world a greater sense of empowerment. Zucker again notes that “empowerment is defined by most women rabbis as a conscious desire to replace the more traditional hierarchal structures with much a greater emphasis on ‘shared responsibilities, privileges and power.’”¹²⁰ Julie Goss adds, “Women rabbis are consciously reinterpreting the relationship between rabbi and congregant. No longer is it ‘omnipotent patriarchal leader and humble follower,’ for the rabbi’s role is being redefined.”¹²¹ Both Goss and Zucker quote Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin in stating that, “It’s no longer the distant holy man, but rather the hand holder, and educator to inspire and teach... The idea is to empower the congregant to be a more active member of the Jewish community.”¹²²

Women rabbis are working for a model of “creative partnership” within the Jewish community. And their influence is impacting their male counterparts as well. The influence of female rabbis is causing male rabbis to refocus their attention on intimacy and balance. Women rabbis have proved that they can serve the Jewish community in an effective manner, and having

¹¹⁸ Ibid. Zucker, 149.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. Marder and Zucker, 150.

¹²⁰ Ibid. Zucker, 151.

¹²¹ Julie Goss, “Women in the Pulpit: Reworking the Rabbi’s Role.” *Lilith* 15:4 (Fall), 85.

¹²² Ibid. Goss, 16-17.

both male and female rabbis will bring a more well-rounded and balanced leadership model to the Jewish community.

Conclusion

Anne Lapidus Lerner, of the Jewish Theological Seminary, once put forward the question, “If, as has been argued, there is no halakhic barrier, on what grounds can we exclude capable, committed women from the rabbinate?” That is my question as well. If there seems to be no valid social, biblical, or *halachic* reason to continue refusing Messianic Jewish *smicha* to qualified women, then maybe our current position should be reevaluated. Therefore I argue that it is time for Messianic Judaism to join our larger Jewish world in openly ordaining women as Messianic rabbis.

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