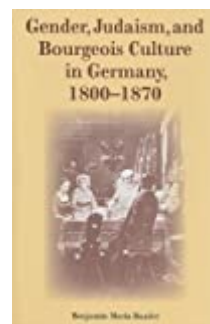


Benjamin Maria Baader. *Gender, Judaism and Bourgeois Culture in Germany, 1800-1870.* Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2006. 292 S. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34734-3.



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Women and the Privatization of Nineteenth-Century Judaism

A great deal has been written in recent decades about Reform Judaism, especially in Germany, but Benjamin Baader's gender-oriented perspective provides a fresh framework to reexamine this well-trod turf. Countering an impression that little changed with regard to the status of women in Judaism during the course of the otherwise exceedingly eventful nineteenth century, Baader demonstrates that apart from the formal status of women in the synagogue, a great deal actually did change concerning Jewish women. The notion that during a century of intense activity concerning the Jews, characterized by debates on emancipation and religious diversity, reformers kept the issue of women's status in Judaism on the backburner derived at least in part from the low priority placed on these questions at the rabbinical conferences of 1844-46. At these three conferences, a group of twenty-five to thirty of the primary and secondary leadership of the reform rabbinate debated at some length subjects like Jewish political loyalty to the state and the role of Hebrew in prayer. They themselves interpreted the debate on Hebrew as reverberating back to the question of political loyalty with Jews maintaining their own language and thus perpetuating a separate sense of national con-

sciousness. The rabbis also devoted considerable attention to the rapid and steep decline in Sabbath observance and synagogue attendance.

It is quite indicative of the Reform movement of the time that it did not agree to adopt the most obvious reform of all—to change the day of the Jewish Sabbath to correspond with that marked by the societies in which European and American Jews resided. Economic and social considerations seemed to scream for such a change, but with the exception of more radical groups in Berlin and Chicago, reformers did not declare Sunday the Jewish Sabbath. After a lengthy discussion that reached no resolution at the last of these conferences in Breslau in 1846, it is of little surprise that the rabbis, who were most likely both exhausted and frustrated, had little strength or will to undertake any significant discussion regarding women in Judaism. As Baader accurately observes, any change moving toward equality of the sexes would in fact have run counter to the social norms in Germany at the time.

Baader's fundamental thesis does not mitigate the inaction of Reform Judaism regarding women. Rather, he

posits that in multiple dimensions, Judaism was fundamentally transformed during the nineteenth century in ways that brought it closer to values identified with femininity, especially the adoption—across the religious spectrum from Reform to Neo-Orthodoxy—of an aesthetic sense that came to permeate religious life both at home and in the synagogue. While males continued to lead services, they did so with a new commitment toward decorum, music, and spirituality. Choirs, sermons, and prayers in the German vernacular became common elements in the changing synagogue milieu. Female attendance in the synagogue grew in marked contrast to medieval times and with a still separate, but more integrated presence than during the early modern period.

Baader has written a work of thorough and imaginative scholarship. His search for sources took him in numerous and rewarding directions. Although he emphasizes theoretical essays by leading spokesmen of the eighteenth-century Haskalah and nineteenth-century rabbis like reformer Abraham Geiger and neo-orthodox Samson Raphael Hirsch, he also pays close attention to the practical side, commenting rather frequently that theoretical proposals failed to echo in the realities of Jewish life. Obviously significant in such a study are those few women, more in England than in Germany, who contributed to the recasting of Judaism along spiritual and aesthetic lines. Several Rothschild wives and daughters played an important role in this emerging literature, and Baader's discussion of their presentations of Judaism represents a pioneering contribution.

Baader presents a sophisticated, well-nuanced argument, notably steeping his discussions of nineteenth-century changes not only in contemporary context, but also referring to much older traditions, most especially in his discussion of liturgical changes, where he describes at length the continuities and change between nineteenth-century liturgical innovation and the earlier *tekhines* prayers recited by women and deriving primarily from the eighteenth century. This wide-ranging search for materials and in-depth reconstruction of older materials that others might not have bothered with characterizes the scholarly achievement that Baader has given us. I will certainly include sections of this book in my future teaching of Modern Jewish Religious Movements.

And yet, aspects of the style and structure of this book suggest that Baader just cannot quite tighten the screws on a complete revision of the earlier view that nineteenth-century religious leaders in Germany failed

in the end to affect a fundamental change in the status of women in Judaism. Baader repeats on numerous occasions throughout the book that men in earlier times earned their status in Judaism through a devotion to learning of traditional texts, especially the Talmud, and that this was no longer the case in the nineteenth century. Even rabbis, especially but not just reform rabbis, now earned their reputation and success through oratorical skills, critical scholarship, and for some, by their pastoral skills. Fair enough, but this description is repeated in several locations. I am struck by the cyclical impact of the repetition: to me it says that the main arguments of the book cannot quite move toward resolution; that in the end, the argument fails to progress from a traditional narrative to a counter-narrative that reaches a climax.

In the end, perhaps sufficient change did not occur. The very fact that the closing chapter, "Modern Rabbis and Jewish Women," emphasizes not public change, but personal relations, with at least one allusion that borders on improprieties, hardly represents a satisfactory culmination to an argument of fundamental change. In some ways, I enjoyed this chapter the most, for as well as I know this material, I learned a great deal about some of the leading rabbis of the time, but the fact that rabbis now appreciated associations with females is hardly a confirmation of changes in Judaism. Baader's final sentences in his closing chapter prior to the conclusion ring hollow at least to me: "Yet now rabbis themselves, whose intellectual prowess and potency had been the pride of their communities, embodied such an alternative religiosity. Rather than studying Talmud Torah like men and among men, they cooperated with women in educational, literary, and spiritual matters, valued women as friends, and sought to teach girls" (p. 210). Thus, on the one hand, as a closing, I sense an echo of disappointment with the process. This culmination sounds pale when one is looking for an increased role for women, for example, in the synagogue milieu. But on the other hand, every clause in this sentence rings with change. Rabbis, who once studied a certain canon of texts among themselves, now engaged a much broader sphere of intellectual endeavor, and they did so with women as their partners. As Baader emphasizes in his fundamental thesis: Judaism became bourgeois Judaism and in the process much more private. Here he finds the spheres of dramatic change. Those of us who thought previously that there was little to discuss about new Jewish attitudes toward women in nineteenth-century Germany have simply been looking in the wrong place.

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