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Elisheva Baumgarten, *Biblical Women and Jewish Daily Life in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 278 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780812253580; \$50.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780812297522.

Review by Constant J. Mews, Monash University.

The title of this beautifully produced volume by Elisheva Baumgarten is not fully accurate. This monograph reflects on how biblical women were interpreted not just in Jewish rabbinical tradition but in a wide number of visually stunning illuminated Jewish liturgical manuscripts. The author's bold claim is that these necessarily elite witnesses can shed light on the daily life of Jewish communities in medieval Europe. She also makes fascinating comparisons throughout her text with how Jewish understanding of biblical women compares to Christian interpretations of the same figures. What emerges is a nuanced picture of both parallels and differences in the way the women of the Hebrew Bible were understood by the two communities. The phrase "daily life" implies a nitty-gritty social history that might cover social and economic details of a particular community. What the volume in fact provides is a fascinating cultural history of how the memory of the women of the Hebrew Bible was invoked in moments of high ritual within Jewish tradition. It deserves to be read by those interested not just in medieval Jewish history, but in the multiplicity of possible understandings of the complex feminine figures preserved in what Christians call the Old Testament. While Baumgarten's focus is necessarily on continental Europe in general, many of the texts and manuscripts on which she draws are from medieval France.

Baumgarten organizes the book into six chapters: the first two examining themes in Jewish tradition, such as discussion of Eve and appeal to the matriarchs in general, followed by three subsequent chapters on specific biblical women and a final concluding chapter. In Christian tradition, the figure of Eve tends to be remembered for one thing only: the transmission to all subsequent generations of what Augustine called original sin. The Christian elevation of Mary as mother of God served to highlight a fundamentally negative picture of Eve, while at the same time overshadowing other women in biblical tradition. Baumgarten avoids crude generalisation about how Eve was presented in Jewish tradition, noting how Jewish rabbis were not immune from reading key passages of Genesis in ways that were not unlike those of their Christian peers. This serves to reinforce her argument, however, about the multiplicity of ways in which Eve could be remembered outside a rabbinical elite. She argues that biblical literacy deserves to be understood in a multivalent form through the notion of "ecotypes" (a term taken from the work of David Hopkin on nineteenth-century French culture) that explores the different ways in which biblical narratives might be retold.^[1] Given the difficult experience of European Jewish

communities over the last thousand years, it is extraordinary that so many texts and illuminated manuscripts have survived, even though they may represent only the tip of an iceberg of Jewish medieval culture.

While rabbis might not speak about Eve in terms of sin, they did see her as exemplary of all women in experiencing suffering and pain, and as helpmate to Adam rather than as his equal. The tradition of reading Eve as created from Adam's rib reinforced a stereotype of subordination for both Jews and Christians. Visual representations in Hebrew manuscripts of Adam, Eve, and the serpent are sometimes astonishingly similar to the Christian exemplars on which they are modelled. Yet Baumgarten also picks up valuable details of social life from rabbinical commentaries, such as women leading a funeral procession, even if some Christian authorities disapproved of the practice. There was much in midrashic tradition about the different ritual duties of women, such as the lighting of candles, of menstrual obligations, and of baking bread. Through such details, we gain insight into otherwise forgotten perspectives. Prayers composed for women even well into the early modern period offer examples of how Eve could be presented to women as an example to be followed rather than rejected.

Similar considerations apply to the four great matriarchs presented in Genesis: Sarah (wife of Abraham), her daughter-in-law Rebecca (wife of Isaac and mother of Jacob and Esau), Leah (Jacob's first wife), and Rachel (Jacob's second wife and mother of Joseph and Benjamin). These women, only vaguely known to those raised in Christian tradition, offered a rich range of human experiences within medieval Jewish culture, being often remembered in prayers given to women to recite. This could be at different moments in the liturgical year, or in times of sickness or childbirth. Given that Rachel died in childbirth, it might be that Hannah, mother of Samuel, was a more appropriate role model to invoke in that situation. The sheer multiplicity of these prayers, for which there is no equivalent in Christian tradition, suggests that the Virgin and other female saints may have taken over the formative role provided by these women. Baumgarten draws not just on these prayers but on rich visual traditions (themselves emulating Christian exemplars) that restore memory of the matriarchs, just as important in shaping Jewish tradition as the patriarchs of old.

Deborah, who led the people of Israel to victory against Sisera, ruler of the Canaanites, according to Judges 4-5, is better known in Christian tradition than Jael, in whose tent Sisera takes refuge, but who then executes her guest. Not the least fascinating part of Baumgarten's narrative is her elucidation of the moral complexities presented by Jael, in particular her relationship to Sisera, with whom she has sex prior to murdering him. The rabbis struggled to preserve a traditional moral code when dealing with the story. Baumgarten is also interested in how Deborah was rediscovered as a female leader by certain Christians interested in female leadership (notably Peter Abelard in relationship to Heloise, and Hildegard of Bingen). While more could be said about the matriarchs' contested place in Christian tradition, this is not the major focus of this book.

Similar considerations apply to Jewish memory of the charity of Abigail, formerly married to "brutish and ill-mannered" Nabal before becoming David's second wife. Described in 1 Samuel 25 as both beautiful and intelligent, she provided food to David when he was fleeing from Saul, a gesture that subsequently became interpreted as an act of charity. In Talmudic tradition, Abigail resisted David's advances and prophesied his future sin with Bathsheba. These texts provided ample material, however, for subsequent reflection on the obligations of charity placed on women

of means. Baumgarten offers in translation fascinating texts about her action, interspersed with parallel Christian texts about Abigail. The recurring difficulty with these Christian parallels (which amply deserve further exploration) is that it is never quite clear whether they are a central part of the book's narrative. Each of these chapters could become the focus of a more thorough comparative analysis.

This is also true of the tragic figure of Jephthah's daughter, sacrificed by her father after he returned from war to fulfil a vow that he had made (according to Judges 11:31-40) that he would sacrifice the first person he met after returning from fighting. Baumgarten repeats an argument made by Margaret Alexiou and Peter Dronke that the version of this story provided in a first-century narrative (attributed to Pseudo-Philo) was known in the Latin West from at least the ninth century, and that this helps explain how it was retold by Peter Abelard in one of his moving Laments written for Heloise.[2] Whether or not Abelard draws on Pseudo-Philo (who names Jephthah's daughter as Seila), his reading of her act of self-sacrifice has clear resonances with that of Heloise. Baumgarten compares Abelard's reading to that of various rabbinic commentators, including both the Ashkenazim who considered that she was killed as a virgin bride and Karaites in Spain, who have considered that she was simply consecrated to God. Jephthah's daughter was particularly remembered at celebrations of *tekufah*, those moments of the solstice and equinox when there was a ritual prohibition on drinking water, to emphasize the beginning of a new season. Exactly why this connection was made does not become clear in the analysis, other than that she was invoked as an example of pious religious duty.

This volume provides a fascinating introduction to medieval Jewish ritual life as it applied to women. We learn of the important role played by biblical stories about women that are far more sophisticated than the easy moralizations made in much Christian discourse. Whether this is a book about daily life could be questioned. On many occasions it seeks to become a study in comparative exegesis of the ways in which Jews and Christians interpreted biblical women. This uncertainty is more than compensated for, however, by the richness of its documentation and the visual power of the many illuminated Hebrew manuscripts included by way of illustration. Baumgarten's book deserves to be explored by all interested in the way medieval people, both Jewish and Christian, adapted the memory of the women recorded in scripture.

NOTES

[1] David M. Hopkin, "The Ecotype, or a Modest Proposal to Reconnect Cultural and Social History," in *Exploring Cultural History. Essays in Honour of Peter Burke*, eds. Melissa Calaresu, Joan-Pau Rubiés, Filippo de Vivo (Farnham, 2010), pp. 31-54.

[2] Margaret Alexiou and Peter Dronke, "The Lament of Jephthah's Daughter: Themes, Traditions, Originality," *Studi Medievali*, 3rd series, 12 (1971): 819-863.

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