

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted April 25, 2002 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

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THE MYSTERY WOMAN

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Dear Friends,

Several months back I stumbled onto something of a mystery and I'd like your help in sorting out what we know and what we can suppose. Just think of it as a Talmudic game of "Clue"!

I was watching the movie "The Closer You Get" (released on VHS under the title "American Women"). It's a hysterically funny movie about Irish men, stuck in a small town, advertising for American women to come join them at their Saint Martha's Day dance.

I became curious about Saint Martha and was finally able to find out that she is the patroness of cooks (e.g., Martha Stewart) and that she's a model of hospitality. You can find more at <http://saints.catholic.org/saints/martha.html>.

What interested me is that Rabbinic Literature also has a Martha: an exceedingly wealthy woman who could well have afforded great hospitality.

She was married to a high priest, Joshua ben Gamla who emphasized the importance of Jewish education (B. Baba Batra 21a, Josephus Antiquities 20:213). As a widow, she should not have been allowed to marry a high priest. They ordinarily must marry virgins but Martha pulls it off:

A high priest must not marry a widow....If he betrothed a widow and was [then] appointed high priest he consummates the marriage. It once happened with Joshua ben Gamla that he betrothed Martha the daughter of Boethus and the king appointed him high priest, and he consummated the marriage....(M. Yebamot 6:4)

Martha seems to have been a member of the Boethusians. This was a group that probably originated with Simeon b.

Boethus who was appointed high priest by Herod the Great in 24 B.C.E. The Boethusians closely resembled the Sadducees and may have been a branch of them. The sages regarded the Boethusians as cynical priests who obtained their positions through bribes and who did not take the restrictions of their offices seriously.

So this Martha, a widow, was betrothed to a priest who then became high priest and was permitted to consummate the marriage. The Gemara fills in "the rest of the story", so to speak, of Martha's marriage to Joshua. Apparently, Joshua ben Gamla obtained some help from his new wife in becoming high priest.

Said Rav Joseph, I see here a conspiracy; for Rav Assi, in fact, related that Martha the daughter of Boethus brought to King Yannai a basket of coins before he gave an appointment to Joshua ben Gamla among the high priests. (B. Yebamot 61a // B. Yoma 18a)

The King called Yannai here refers to Agrippa II (28-92 C.E.), the last king of the Herodian line. Apparently, Rav Assi suspected that Martha actually bribed the king to appoint Joshua high priest. We should note for the record that it was not uncommon in those days for high priests to be appointed because of their wealth. Therefore, there is nothing exactly inappropriate in Martha's marriage or her actions. She was betrothed to Joshua before he became a high priest and therefore they had the right to consummate the marriage, in line with the mishnah. What Rav Assi seems to object to is the possibility that she bribed the king to make Joshua high priest, although Joshua seems to have been an individual who well deserved the honor.

Martha seems in these passages to be a wealthy, savvy woman; a woman who marries who she wants and spends her money as she wants. She engineers her life and her relationships to suit her needs.

Discussion Questions:

1. So the mystery is this: is our Martha the Martha of the Catholic Church? If you think so, why? If you think not, why? What is possible? What is probable?
2. Perhaps a much more important question is: how do different religions incorporate either historical figures or legendary ones into their traditions? What does this tell us about these traditions?