

## B. The Meaning of "Head of the Synagogue"

### 1. Literary References to the Title

In comparison with other titles of synagogue office, we have at our disposal considerable literary evidence for the title head of the synagogue. The sources, Jewish, Christian and pagan, include references to both Palestinian and Diaspora synagogues.<sup>48</sup>

For the first century, some of the best evidence is found in the New Testament. Mark 5:22,35,36,38 and the parallel Luke 8:49 mention an archisynagōgos, Jairos by name, whose daughter is healed by Jesus. Interesting for our question is the parallel to Mark 5:22, Luke 8:41, where instead of archisynagōgos, Luke writes archōn tēs synagōgēs. That Luke considers the two to be synonymous is shown by his use of archisynagōgos in 8:49. In Matt 9:18,23 we read neither archōn tēs synagōgēs nor archisynagōgos but rather simply archōn. Does this mean that all three titles are synonymous?

Mention should be made here of a textual variant to Acts 14:2 found in the Western text (D, partially supported by syr<sup>hmg</sup> and cop<sup>G67</sup>). Instead of, "The unbelieving Jews stirred up and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against the brothers" (i.e., Paul and Barnabas) the Western text has, "The heads of the synagogue of the Jews and the archons of the synagogue (syr<sup>hmg</sup> omits "of the synagogue," which would give the general meaning of "rulers," possibly identifying them as the rulers of Iconium) stirred up for themselves persecution against the righteous."<sup>49</sup> Important here is the distinction between "heads of the synagogue" and "archons of the synagogue." One should keep in mind, however, that this is a later textual variant, which cannot be used as first-century evidence of this distinction.<sup>50</sup> Further, this textual addition was made by a Christian, who may have had very little knowledge of a Jewish distinction between heads of the synagogue and archons, which would leave us to explain the seeming identification of head of the synagogue, archon of the synagogue and archon found in a synoptic comparison of the Jairos story, as well as within Luke himself (Lk 8:41 vs. 8:49). One could assume that either the identification found in the Jairos story or the distinction made in the Acts textual variant reflects actual Jewish practice or one could assume that the authors in question were not particularly familiar with Jewish synagogue organization and used the titles loosely. This could well be the case with Luke and the author of the textual addition

to Acts 14:2. It is difficult, however, to assume that Matthew, who was writing for Jewish-Christians, would have been unfamiliar with the organizational structure of the synagogue.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps the problem can only be solved by assuming that titular practice varied as to geography and time. At any rate, since two Italian inscriptions (CII 265 from Rome: Stafulus, archōn and archi-synagōgos; CII 553 from Capua: Alfius Juda, archōn, archisynagōgos)<sup>52</sup> give further attestation of a distinction between the two offices, it is probably safe to assume they were usually distinct.

A second question raised by the Jairos passage is whether there was more than one synagogue head in each synagogue (Mark 5:22: "one of the heads of the synagogue, Jairos by name"), but the meaning could simply be that Jairos was one of the class of heads of the synagogue rather than that several synagogue heads served in one synagogue.

Luke 13:10-17 is more instructive as to one of the functions of head of the synagogue. When Jesus healed a woman at the synagogue on the sabbath, the head of the synagogue, "indignant because Jesus had healed on the sabbath, said to the people, 'There are six days in which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the sabbath day'" (Luke 13:14). From this passage it would seem that the head of the synagogue was responsible for keeping the congregation faithful to the Torah.

The Acts of the Apostles attests to the office of head of the synagogue in first-century Diaspora Judaism. When Paul and Barnabas come to Antioch of Pisidia and attend the synagogue service on the sabbath, the heads of the synagogue invite them to give a word of exhortation to the people immediately following the reading of the law and the prophets (Acts 13:15). The plural "heads of the synagogue" is not insignificant here, for the only reasonable interpretation is that this synagogue possessed not just one head of the synagogue, but several. Further, their inviting Paul and Barnabas to give the sermon indicates a leadership role in the planning and organizing of the service, as well as the role of representative of the congregation vis-à-vis the visitors from abroad.

In Acts 18:1-17, which describes Paul's missionary activity in Corinth, we also find more than one head of the synagogue (Acts 18:8: Crispus, who had become a believer in Jesus; Acts 18:17: Sosthenes, who had not)<sup>53</sup> in a single community, although from the passage it is not clear that they served in the same

synagogue. It seems probable that Sosthenes, who in Acts 18:17 is said to have been beaten by the crowd before the judgment seat of Gallio, is the leader of the group of Jews who had attacked Paul and dragged him before the proconsul Gallio with the complaint that Paul was "persuading people to worship God contrary to the law" (Acts 18:13). If Sosthenes was indeed the leader of this delegation, this would point to a function of leadership similar to the one we saw in Luke 13:10-17, where the head of the synagogue warned against transgressing the Torah by breaking the sabbath. Sosthenes' involvement indicates a sense of responsibility for keeping his people faithful to the law, as interpreted by him, as well as a representative role over against the Roman proconsul.

As for rabbinic sources on the first century, one must consider a Mishnaic passage, Yoma 7:1 (parallels: m. Soṭa 7:7,8). The context is the reading from the Torah on Yom Kippur (in m. Soṭa the septennial Sukkot reading of the Torah):

, חזן הכנסת נוטל ספר תורה ונוחננו לראש הכנסת,  
 וראש הכנסת נוחננו לסגן, והסגן נוחננו לכהן גדול.  
 וכהן גדול עומד ומקבל וקורא עומד.

The sexton of the synagogue takes the Torah scroll and gives it to the head of the synagogue (or: of the assembly), and the head of the synagogue gives it to the adjutant high priest, and the adjutant high priest gives it to the high priest. The high priest stands and receives and reads it standing.<sup>54</sup>

Due to the etymological similarity between ר'ֹשׁ הַכְּנֶסֶת hakkēneset and archisynagōgos, the identification between the two is likely. Since it is unclear what would be the purpose of a synagogue on the temple mount, and since Josephus<sup>55</sup> and the Mishnaic tractate Middot do not mention such a synagogue in their descriptions of the temple, Frowald Hüttenmeister<sup>56</sup> and others go against the older interpretation by doubting that such a synagogue existed. Sydney Hoenig translates ר'ֹשׁ הַכְּנֶסֶת hakkēneset as "head of the assembly" and חַזְנָן hazzān as "overseer of the assembly." He believes that they were "Pharisaic leaders of the Anshé Maamad who were stationed in the Temple as the lay participants alongside the Sadducean officiants."<sup>57</sup> If such were to be the case, this would be a rather different meaning of head of the synagogue than is attested elsewhere, i.e., the synagogue head as leader of an individual synagogue. An alternative proposal which would not presuppose the existence of a synagogue on the temple

mount, would be that the hazzan and the r'ōš hakkēneset mentioned here were synagogue functionaries in one of the many synagogues of Jerusalem and were selected for the special honor of passing the Torah scroll to the high priest in the Yom Kippur (and Sukkot) services. The number of persons in the chain of passing certainly seems more than absolutely necessary and must therefore have something to do with honor. According to this interpretation, the hazzan and the r'ōš hakkēneset would be the two representatives of synagogue officials (or of the laity, as Hoenig suggests) in the festival service.

The only r'ōš bēt hakkēneset known to us by name from rabbinic literature is Shagbion (šGBIWN, variant Shavion, šBTWN), who was r'ōš bēt hakkēneset (note the alternative form of the title)<sup>58</sup> in Akhziv in the time of Rabban Gamliel (II), i.e., in the second half of the first century.<sup>59</sup>

The later rabbinic evidence is no less scattered than the material discussed thus far. One is once again reminded of how much the rabbinic authorities differed from their Christian neighbors, the latter producing numerous and complex church orders, while the former displayed little interest in defining the duties of the respective synagogue officers. After the Mishnaic passages discussed above, the earliest rabbinic evidence is found in t. Meg. 4.21 (Zuck. 227): "The head of the synagogue should not read (from the scripture) until others have told him that there is no one."<sup>60</sup> Could this imply that the head of the synagogue was responsible for asking others to read, but did not read himself (or herself)?<sup>61</sup> This would fit in well with Acts 13:15, where the heads of the synagogue ask Paul and Barnabas to preach (rather than preaching themselves).

In b. Pesah 49b (top) a list has been put together for the young man seeking a wife. It forms a sort of catalogue of highly respected positions in Judaism:

חנו רבנן: לעולם ימכור אדם כל מה שיש לו  
 וישא בה תלמיד חכם. לא מצא בה תלמיד חכם  
 ישא בה גדולי הדור. לא מצא בה גדולי הדור  
 ישא בה ראשי כנסיות, לא מצא בה ראשי כנסיות  
 ישא בה גבאי צדקה. לא מצא בה גבאי צדקה  
 ישא בה מלמדי תינוקות. ולא ישא בה עמי הארץ,  
 מפני שהן שקץ, ונשותיהן שרץ, ועל בנוחיהן  
 הוא אומע "ארור שכב עם כל בהמה".

Our rabbis taught: Let a man always sell all he has and marry the daughter of a scholar. If he does not find the daughter of a scholar, let him marry the daughter of [one of] the great men of the generation. If he does not find the daughter of [one of] the great men of the generation, let him marry the daughter of a head of synagogues. If he does not

find the daughter of a head of synagogues, let him marry the daughter of a charity treasurer. If he does not find the daughter of a charity treasurer, let him marry the daughter of an elementary school teacher, but let him not marry the daughter of an 'am ha-aretz because they are detestable and their wives are vermin, and of their daughters it is said, "Cursed be he that lieth with any manner of beast" (Deut 27:21).<sup>62</sup>

This passage shows which positions the rabbis considered to be the highest; head of the synagogue is listed third, after scholar and great men of the generation (probably a title of civic leadership) and before charity treasurer and children's teacher. This view is from a particular perspective, and it is therefore easy to understand why scholar would rank highest. One must be cautious about using this list as an objective presentation of how all Jews would have ranked professions and offices. Given this particular perspective, slot number three in the list may well imply that the head of the synagogue was normally a person of some learning. The whole thrust of the advice given here is not to marry the daughter of an 'am ha-aretz, i.e., the contrast is between ignorance of the law and knowledge of it. This confirms the image of the head of the synagogue which has been emerging from the literary passages referred to thus far.

A further sign of the honor in which the rabbis held the head of the synagogue is the directive in a baraita to drink a glass of wine in honor of the head of the synagogue at a funeral ceremony (y. Ber. 6a.28-29).<sup>63</sup>

Several fourth-century laws preserved in the Theodosian Code further attest that the head of the synagogue was one of the main synagogue officials. Cod. Theod. 16.8.4 reads:

Idem A. hiereis et archisynagogis et patribus synagogarum et ceteris, qui in eodem loco deserviunt. Hieres et archisynagogos et patres synagogarum et ceteros, qui synagogis deserviunt, ab omni corporali munere liberos esse praecipimus. Dat. kal. dec. Constant(ino)p(oli) Basso et Ablavio cons.<sup>64</sup>

The same Augustus to the priests, heads of the synagogues, fathers of the synagogues, and all others who serve in the said place.

We command that priests, heads of the synagogues, fathers of the synagogues, and all others who serve the synagogues shall be free from every compulsory public service of a corporal nature.

Given on the kalends of December at Constantinople in the year of the consulship of Bassus and Ablavius (December 1, 331; 330).<sup>65</sup>

The legal assumption is that since these officials are already fulfilling a munus, they should be liberated from the public munera corporalia.<sup>66</sup> Cod. Theod. 16.8.13 from the year 397 reaffirms certain privileges for synagogue heads and other Jewish officials, among which are the exemption from the forced public service of decurions and the right to live according to their own laws.

Idem AA. Caesario p(raefecto) p(raetori)o. Iudaei sint obstricti caerimoniis suis: nos interea in conservandis eorum privilegiis veteres imitemur, quorum sanctionibus definitum est, ut privilegia his, qui inlustrius patriarcharum dicioni subiecti sunt, archisynagogis patriarchisque ac presbyteris ceterisque, qui in eius religionis sacramento versantur, nutu nostri numinis perseverent ea, quae venerandae Christianae legis primis clericis sanctimonia deferuntur. Id enim et divi principes Constantinus et Constantius, Valentinianus et Valens divino arbitrio decreverunt. Sint igitur etiam a curialibus muneribus alieni pareantque legibus suis. Dat. kal. ivl. Caesario et Attico cons.<sup>67</sup>

The same Augustuses to Caesarius, Praetorian Prefect. Jews shall be bound by their own ritual. Meanwhile, in preserving their privileges, We shall imitate the ancients by whose sanctions it has been determined that privileges shall be preserved for those who are subject to the rule of the Illustrious Patriarchs, for the heads of the synagogues, the patriarchs, and the elders, and all the rest who are occupied in the ceremonial of that religion, namely those privileges according to the consent of Our Imperial Divinity, which by virtue of their holy office are conferred on the chief clergy of the venerable Christian religion. The foregoing, indeed, was decreed by the divine imperial authority of the sainted Emperors Constantine and Constantius, Valentinian and Valens. Such Jews shall therefore be exempt from the compulsory public services of decurions and shall obey their own laws.

Given on the kalends of July in the year of the consulship of Caesarius and Atticus (July 1, 397).<sup>68</sup>

While these two laws do not give us actual details of any of the concrete functions of synagogue heads, Cod. Theod. 16.8.14 from the year 399, under the emperor Honorius, does:

Idem AA. Messalae p(raefecto) p(raetori)o. Superstitionis indignae est, ut archisynagogi sive presbyteri Iudaeorum vel quos ipsi apostolos vocant, qui ad exigendum aurum adque argentum a patriarcha certo tempore diriguntur, a singulis synagogis exacta summam adque susceptam ad eundem reportent. Qua de re omne, quidquid considerata temporis ratione confidimus esse collectum, fideliter ad nostrum dirigatur aerarium: de cetero autem nihil praedicto decernimus esse mittendum. Noverint igitur populi Iudaeorum removisse nos depraedationis huiusmodi functionem. Quod si qui ab illo depopulatore Iudaeorum ad hoc officium exactionis fuerint directi, iudicibus offerantur, ita ut tamquam in legum nostrarum violatores sententia proferatur. Dat. iii id. april. Med(iolano) Theodoro v. d. cons.<sup>69</sup>

The same Augustuses to Messala, Praetorian Prefect. It is characteristic of an unworthy superstition that the heads of the synagogues or the elders of the Jews or those whom they themselves call apostles, who are dispatched by the patriarch at a certain time to collect gold and silver, should bring back to the patriarch the sum which has been exacted and collected from each of the synagogues. Wherefore, everything that We are confident has been collected, taking into consideration the period of time, shall be faithfully dispatched to Our treasury. For the future, moreover, We decree that nothing shall be sent to the aforesaid patriarch. The people of the Jews shall know, therefore, that We have abolished the practice of such depredation. But if any persons should be sent on such a mission of collection by that despoiler of the Jews, they shall be brought before the judges, in order that a sentence may be pronounced against them as violators of Our laws.

Given on the third day before the ides of April at Milan in the year of the consulship of the Most Noble Theodorus (April 11, 399).<sup>70</sup>

The practice presupposed here is a continuation of the ancient practice of each male Jew annually contributing a half-shekel to support the temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the temple, a similar practice grew in its stead, with the money going to support the patriarch in Palestine. From this description, one could assume that the synagogue heads and presbyters collect money in their individual synagogues and then turn it over to the apostles who have been sent by the patriarch to collect the money and to bring it back to him. One could also interpret the passage to mean that some of the money was brought directly by synagogue heads and elders, while some of it was brought by the apostles sent out for this purpose.<sup>71</sup>

The value of these three laws is that they give an outsider's view, i.e., that of the lawgiver, of the internal leadership structure of the synagogue. In the eye of the lawgiver, the head of the synagogue was one of the main, if not the main, synagogue functionaries.

Several patristic sources make reference to synagogue heads. In *Dialogue with Trypho* 137, Justin Martyr (died ca. 165) delivers the following exhortation to Jews:

Συμφάμενοι οὖν μὴ λοιδορῆτε ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, μηδὲ  
 Φαρισαίοις πειθόμενοι διδασκάλους τὸν βασιλέα τοῦ Ἰσρα-  
 ῆλ ἐπισκώφητέ ποτε, ὅποια διδάσκουσιν οἱ ἀρχισυνάγωγοι  
 ὑμῶν, μετὰ τὴν προσευχὴν.<sup>72</sup>

Do not agree to abuse the Son of God, nor follow the Pharisees as teachers in jesting at the King of Israel, as your synagogue heads teach you, according to the prayer.

While the polemical nature of this passage must serve as a warning not to accept it at face value, the image of head of the synagogue as spiritual and intellectual leader in no way contradicts what we have seen up to this point; it rather confirms it.

Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 315-403), in his discussion of the Jewish-Christian Ebionites, writes:

Αναγκάζουσι δὲ, καὶ παρ' ἡλικίαν ἐγκαμίζουσι τοὺς νέους, ἐξ ἐπιτροπῆς δῆθεν τῶν παρ' αὐτοῖς διδασκάλων. Πρεσβυτέρους γὰρ οὗτοι ἔχουσι καὶ ἀρχισυναγωγούς. Συναγωγὴν δὲ οὗτοι καλοῦσι τὴν εἰαυτῶν ἐκκλησίαν, καὶ οὐχὶ ἐκκλησίαν, τῷ Χριστῷ δὲ ὀνόματι μόνον σεμνύονται.

Their young men, having attained the marriageable age, are given to marriage under coercion, on account of a decision of their teachers, for they have elders and synagogue heads, and they call their church a synagogue and not a church and honor Christ in name only.<sup>73</sup>

It seems that the Jewish-Christians described here maintained the traditional synagogue organizational structure. While we do not know to what extent Epiphanius actually had direct contact with Jewish-Christians, there seems no reason to doubt that Jewish-Christians would have maintained Jewish organizational structures. If this bit of information is not a reflection of the fourth century, then it may have come down to Epiphanius from his sources and reflect an earlier period. What is interesting here is that synagogue heads and elders are classified as teachers.

Palladius, in his Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom, probably written around 408 in Syene in Egypt, states that the ("corrupt and falsely named") patriarch of the Jews changes yearly, as do the synagogue heads, in order to gain wealth, for the buying and selling of the priesthood is a Jewish (and Egyptian) custom.<sup>74</sup> The context of this statement is a discussion of six bishops who were accused of having attained their office by the payment of money, whereby the Christian rejection of the practice is contrasted with the Jewish tolerance of it. Given this polemical purpose, one should be more sceptical of taking this remark at face value than is Jean Juster, who notes, "This text proves that the archisynagogue was nominated for a term."<sup>75</sup> Palladius himself does not state that he is personally familiar with this Jewish practice, but rather employs the vague introductory formula "it is said" (*phasi*).

Several further Christian sources do not seem reliable enough to warrant a detailed discussion. The Acts of Pilate,<sup>76</sup> which mentions heads of the synagogue throughout, seems to have drawn upon a sort of catalogue of known Jewish titles (synagogue



heads, Levites, elders, priests, high priests) and combined them at random to create scenes in which Jewish leaders debated and deliberated in council meetings. Further, the passages in Ambrose<sup>77</sup> and Jerome<sup>78</sup> cited by Juster to support his theory that synagogue heads had to have a knowledge of medicine, do not seem particularly convincing to me.

Pagan authors were also familiar with the title. In Flavius Vopiscus' Life of Saturninus 8, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* 3.398-399 is preserved a letter from the emperor Hadrian (117-138) to his brother-in-law Servianus. Among the various negative comments about Egypt we read:

Illic qui Serapem colunt Christiani sunt, et devoti sunt Serapi qui se Christi episcopos dicunt. Nemo illic archisynagogus Iudaeorum, nemo Samarites, nemo Christianorum presbyter non mathematicus, non haruspex, non aliptes.

Those who worship Serapis are in fact Christians, and those who call themselves bishops of Christ are, in fact, devotees of Serapis. There is no head of the Jewish synagogue, no Samaritan, no Christian elder, who is not an astrologer, a soothsayer, or an anointer.<sup>79</sup>

Of interest here is the parallelization between Christian bishop, Christian elder and Jewish synagogue head.<sup>80</sup> This is a further attestation that the title was well known.

The emperor Alexander Severus (222-235) was called the "Syrian archisynagogus"<sup>81</sup> by his opponents, most likely because he was friendly to the Jewish people. This simply serves to underscore that "head of the synagogue" was the official Jewish title most widely known in the ancient world.

## 2. Inscriptional References to the Title

Well over thirty Greek and Latin inscriptions making mention of synagogue heads are known to modern scholarship.<sup>82</sup> Of these, three make reference to women synagogue heads. The geographical spread is large: Italy,<sup>83</sup> Greece,<sup>84</sup> Macedonia,<sup>85</sup> Moesia,<sup>86</sup> Asia Minor,<sup>87</sup> Cyprus,<sup>88</sup> Syria,<sup>89</sup> Palestine,<sup>90</sup> and Africa.<sup>91</sup> The chronological span is also considerable, ranging from before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.<sup>92</sup> until well into the Byzantine period.

What can we learn from these inscriptions about the function of the synagogue head? Taking note of the fact that a number of synagogue heads are mentioned as donating portions of the synagogue or of restoring the synagogue,<sup>93</sup> it is tempting to conclude that the head of the synagogue was in charge of maintaining the

physical plant of the synagogue. Unfortunately, this argument falls in the face of the fact that bearers of other titles, as well as bearers of no titles, are also listed as donors in numerous inscriptions. Furthermore, the very nature of epigraphical material is such that we must expect building activity to be mentioned fairly frequently. One memorialized donations in inscriptions. Bookkeeping, organizing the religious service, administering the guest house and ritual bath, exhorting the congregation to follow the commandments or any of the other functions which must have been performed by synagogue officials did not merit public inscriptions. Mention of these is more likely to occur in literature, if at all.

If the inscriptions cannot help us to define accurately the functions of the head of the synagogue, they can nevertheless provide us with useful information. For example, on the basis of inscriptional evidence, one must conclude that the head of the synagogue was distinct from the archon. In CII 265<sup>94</sup> and 553,<sup>95</sup> one person holds both titles, indicating that they cannot be synonymous. Further, CII 766<sup>96</sup> lists a head of the synagogue-for-life, a head of the synagogue and an archon, as if these were different offices.

Of special interest is the Theodotos inscription (CII 1404; Lifshitz, *Donateurs*, no. 79)<sup>97</sup> which was found on Mount Ophel in Jerusalem and dates from before the destruction of the temple:

Θ[ε]όδοτος Ούετιτήνου, ἱερεὺς καὶ  
 2 ἀ[ρ]χισυνάγωγος, υἱὸς ἀρχισυν[αγώ]-  
 γ[ο]υ, υἱωνὸς ἀρχισυν[α]γώγου, ᾠκο-  
 4 δόμησε τὴν συναγωγὴν εἰς ἀν[άγν]ω-  
 σ[ι]ν νόμου καὶ εἰς [δ]ιδασχ[η]ν ἐντολῶν, καὶ  
 6 τ[ὸ]ν ξενῶνα, καὶ τὰ δώματα καὶ τὰ χρη-  
 σ[τ]ήρια τῶν ὑδάτων εἰς κατάλυμα τοῦ-  
 8 ς [χ]ρήζουσιν ἀπὸ τῆς ξέ[ν]ης, ἣν ἐθέμε-  
 λ[ί]ωσαν οἱ πατέρες [α]ὐτοῦ καὶ οἱ πρε-  
 10 σ[β]ύτεροι καὶ Σιμωνίδης.

Theodotos, son of Vettenos, priest and head of the synagogue, son of a head of the synagogue, grandson of a head of the synagogue, built the synagogue for the reading of the law and the teaching of the commandments, and the hostel and the side rooms and the water facilities, as lodging for those from abroad who need (it). His fathers and the elders and Simonides founded it (i.e., the synagogue).

From this we get a vivid picture of the types of activities occurring in a synagogue complex. In addition to the reading of scripture and the study of the commandments, we read of a guest house for visitors from abroad, which was probably especially necessary in Jerusalem, as well as water facilities, most likely

for ritual purposes. Each of these items required administration, and while the active participation of the congregation must be presupposed, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume that synagogue officers had a special responsibility in the administration of all these aspects of synagogue life. The officers mentioned in this inscription are synagogue heads and elders. This does not mean that this congregation had no other officers, but it does imply a sort of council which formed the founding body.<sup>98</sup>

It is tempting to conclude from the fact that Theodotos' father and grandfather were also synagogue heads that the office was hereditary. CII 587,<sup>99</sup> which speaks of the child synagogue head Kallistos, who died at the age of three years and three months, would serve to strengthen this hypothesis, as would CII 584,<sup>100</sup> which speaks of Joseph, head of the synagogue, son of Joseph, head of the synagogue. It may be that the office was hereditary in the cases mentioned, but if we assume that it was hereditary everywhere, then there is no way of explaining the phrase "head-for-life of the synagogue" (ho dia biou archi-synagōgos), which occurs in CII 744<sup>101</sup> and 766,<sup>102</sup> for that implies that not every head of the synagogue was one for life.<sup>103</sup> Also of importance is Lifshitz, Donateurs no. 85<sup>104</sup> which, according to Lifshitz's reconstruction, mentions a person who had been head of the synagogue five times, which obviously implies temporary terms of office. If most synagogue heads served for a term only, then they must have been elected or appointed, for a title bestowed by inheritance would surely be for life. A further factor which makes it unlikely that the title archisynagōgos was generally an inherited one is that the title which the son bore was not always that of his father. In CII 504, for example, the son is a gerusiarch, while the father is an archisynagōgos.<sup>105</sup> Here the office of archisynagōgos could not have been hereditary. At most one could imagine that we are dealing with the custom of honoring the son of an office-bearer by appointing or electing him to an office, be it that of his father or another.<sup>106</sup>

Part of the general difficulty in evaluating these hints that the office may have been hereditary, as well as the literary evidence for the patriarch's having appointed the synagogue heads annually, which was discussed above, is the temptation to take one piece of evidence as applying to all places and for the entire period in question. Rather than taking the Theodotos inscription (CII 1404) and the two inscriptions from Venosa

(CII 584 and 587) as proof that the office of synagogue head was hereditary, it seems more reasonable to assume that these indicate the special honor in which the son of a synagogue head was held, this honor being expressed in his being (automatically?) appointed or elected to an office, sometimes the same as his father and sometimes not. This reverence could even extend to infants (e.g., CII 587); the boy received the title of the office he would fill when he came of age.

CII 681,<sup>107</sup> 766<sup>108</sup> and 804<sup>109</sup> provide us with a further warning not to assume that the only way to attain the title of synagogue head was by inheritance. In each of these inscriptions the son is a head of the synagogue, and the father bears no title. Thus we see that, although the modern scholar would like very much to have a clear answer as to how a synagogue head was selected, there is no one solution which fits all the literary and epigraphical evidence. It is best to assume that there was no unified practice in this regard. Probably some were appointed by a council or an individual, some were elected, and some inherited the office. Some persons seem to have been synagogue heads for life and others for a period of time.

One inscription deserves special mention because of the constellation of office holders it presents to us. CII 803 (Lifshitz, *Donateurs* 38)<sup>110</sup> is dated to the year 391 and was found, along with many other mosaic inscriptions, in the floor of a synagogue ruin in Apamea in Syria. It reads:

Ἐπὶ τῶν τιμιωτάτων ἀρχισυνα[γῶ]-  
 2 γων Εὐσεβίου καὶ Νεμέου καὶ Φινέου  
 καὶ Θεοδώρου γερουσιάρχου καὶ τῶν  
 4 τιμιωτάτων πρεσβυτέρων Εἰσακίου  
 καὶ Σαούλου καὶ λοιπῶν, Ἰλάσιος, ἀρχισυνά-  
 6 γωγος Ἀντιοχέων, ἐποίησεν τὴν ἴσσοδον τοῦ  
 ψηφίου πό(δας) ρν', ἔτους γψ' Εὐδνέου ζ'. Εὐλογία πᾶσι.

L. 4: read τιμιωτάτων.

L. 6: read εἴσσοδον.

At the time of the most illustrious heads of the synagogue Eusebios, Nemios and Phineos, and under the gerusiarch Theodoros, and the most illustrious elders Eisakios and Saulos and the others, Ilasios, head of the synagogue of the Antiochenes, made the entrance of the mosaic, 150 feet, in the year 703, in the seventh month of Audyneos. Blessing on all.

Three offices are mentioned: head of the synagogue, gerusiarch and elder. If the order of offices implies order of importance, then head of the synagogue was the highest office in this synagogue. The fact that Eusebios, Nemios and Phineos were all

-serving as heads of the synagogue in the year 391 is an important piece of evidence for the debate as to whether more than one archisynagōgos could serve simultaneously.<sup>111</sup> Probably Theodoros the gerusiarch presided over the council of the elders,<sup>112</sup> who seem to be too numerous to mention.

How Ilasios fits into this picture is unclear. His title, archisynagōgos of the Antiochenes, surely cannot imply that he was the sole synagogue head in Antioch, as Jean-Baptiste Frey imagines.<sup>113</sup> In such a large city as Antioch, which had a considerable Jewish population, there must certainly have been many synagogue heads.<sup>114</sup> Perhaps Ilasios served as synagogue head for a group of people from Antioch who had moved to Apamea and become part of the community there.

### 3. Reconstruction of the Office of Head of the Synagogue

The reader with a sensitivity for chronology, geography, genre and religious tradition will doubtlessly be overwhelmed by the variety of material cited, and cited side by side, as if Moesia were Jerusalem and the first century were the fifth. This colorful mixture of quotations of the friends and enemies of the ancient synagogue heads should at the very least remind us of how little we know of the office they held. The dream of every historian of religion is to trace a development, to differentiate, to set the late fourth-century Apamean synagogue head in sharp relief against the first-century Roman one. It is not for lack of desire that this will not be done. It is for lack of evidence.

If there is not enough evidence to trace a development, there is also not so little evidence as to evoke general despair of knowing anything. The evidence clearly permits us to say, for example, that "head of the synagogue" was one of the best, if not the best, known titles of synagogue office. One could call Alexander Severus the "Syrian archisynagogus" and the meaning was clear. I would propose the following reconstruction of what seems to have been the leading office in the ancient synagogue.

#### Was there more than one synagogue head in each synagogue?

The evidence (Mark 5:22; Acts 13:15; CII 766, 803; possibly Acts 18:8,17) suggests that more than one synagogue head could serve in a synagogue at a time. No ancient source limits the number to one.<sup>115</sup>

How was a head of the synagogue selected?

There seems to have been more than one method of selection. The two inscriptions mentioning synagogue heads who were sons of synagogue heads (CII 584, 1404) and the one mentioning an infant head of the synagogue (CII 587) suggest that the office was hereditary. The two inscriptions mentioning a head-for-life of the synagogue (CII 766, 744), as well as the one which possibly speaks of a person having been head of the synagogue five times (Lifshitz, Donateurs no. 85), suggest that not all held the office for life and that some were selected in a way other than by inheritance. Although election is not mentioned in connection with synagogue heads, it should not be excluded as a possibility. If there is a kernel of truth to the note in Palladius (Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom 15) about the patriarch's appointing synagogue heads, then this could be seen in connection with Cod. Theod. 16.8.15 with its mention of "persons whom the patriarchs have placed in authority over others." This would mean that among those officials whom the patriarch appointed were included some heads of the synagogue.

What were the functions of the head of the synagogue?

If the synagogue was for "the reading of the law and the teaching of the commandments" (CII 1404), then it is logical to assume that the synagogue head was responsible in a special way for seeing that this was done. Our sources confirm this. Given the thrust of the baraita in b. Pesah 49b, it seems that the head of the synagogue was a person learned in the law. It follows that a major function of the head of the synagogue was the exhortation and spiritual direction of the congregation (Lk 13:10-17; possibly Acts 18:12-17), which included teaching (Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 137; Epiphanius, Panarion 30.18.2). It was the synagogue heads who invited members of the congregation to preach (Acts 13:15); apparently they did not themselves read from scripture unless no one else was able (t. Meg. 4.21). M. Yoma 7:1 and m. Soṭa 7:7-8 report on a special liturgical function accorded to one synagogue (or assembly?) head during a holiday service. The synagogue heads, together with the elders, collected money from their congregations to be sent to the patriarch (Cod. Theod. 16.8.14,17). While responsibility for erecting new synagogues and restoring old ones was not limited to the head of the synagogue, synagogue

heads were among those who felt especially responsible for the building and restoration of synagogues, drawing upon their own funds when necessary (CII 722, 744, 756, 766, 803, 804, 1404, etc.<sup>116</sup>). It is possible that synagogue heads were often members of leading families who were financially able to perform this service.

Using the analogy of Diaspora Jewish leaders today, the ancient Diaspora head of the synagogue was probably both a leader for the congregation and representative of the congregation vis-à-vis non-Jewish neighbors and Roman authorities. (Possibly Acts 18:12-17 is to be seen in this light.) As in the Jewish Diaspora today, the civic and religious functions were probably seldom sharply distinguished.

What was the relationship between the head of the synagogue and other synagogue officials?

The head of the synagogue seems to have been the leading functionary in the ancient synagogue. In inscriptions, wherever synagogue heads are mentioned, they are mentioned first in the list (CII 766, 803). In the Theodosian Code the order varies (cf. Cod. Theod. 16.8.4,13,14). In m. Yoma 7:1 and m. Soṭa 7:7-8 the head of the synagogue occurs before the sexton and after the high priest and the adjutant high priest; in other words, here too, the head of the synagogue is the first of the synagogue officials named, (if the reference is to a synagogue official). In the baraita in b. Pesah. 49b the head of the synagogue does not occur first in the list, but rather after scholar and great ones of the generation and before charity treasurer and teacher of children, but then this is not a list of synagogue officials.

That the head of the synagogue was the main synagogue functionary is further supported by the fact that the title is the one chosen by Alexander Severus's enemies to mock his friendship with the Jews and is the one used in Hadrian's letter to Servianus to single out the typical Jewish official for mockery.

Was the head of the synagogue identical with the archon?

It seems that in most cases archisynagōgos must be distinguished from archōn (CII 265, 553, 766; the Western text of Acts 14:2). The identification between the two implicit in the synoptic comparison of the Jairos story (Matt 9:18,23; Mark 5:22,35,36,38; Luke 8:41,49) could be a loose use of terminology,

a reflection of a time or place in which the two terms were interchangeable, or a mistake.

#### 4. The Role of Women Synagogue Heads

Given the evidence for women heads of the synagogue, and using the proposed reconstruction of the office of synagogue head as a base, what can one say about the role these women might have had? Or did they even have a role? Perhaps the title was purely honorific after all?

The two arguments adduced in favor of the title's being honorific are:

1. The women received the title from their husbands (M. Weinberg, S. Krauss, S. W. Baron, J.-B. Frey, A. C. Bandy);
2. In the later period the title was honorific for both women and men (S. Reinach, Th. Reinach);
3. In the case of women, the title must be honorific (E. Schürer,<sup>117</sup> J. Juster).

Erwin Goodenough's translation, which makes Theopempte a man, will not be discussed here.

Concerning the wife thesis, one searches in vain for the husbands in question. In the three inscriptions with women synagogue heads, no husbands are mentioned. Further, Rufina and Theopempte give the impression of a certain autonomy (control of one's own funds, household and business affairs); if they were married, the marriage seems to have allowed for a certain independence on the part of the women. The fact that Theopempte's son Eusebios does not bear a title shows that, if his father had one, he did not inherit it. This, of course, does not preclude the possibility that Theopempte could have received the title from her husband, but it does call into question the connection between women's titles and children's titles made by modern scholars, the implication being that the former are the wives of, the latter the sons of, synagogue officials. Finally, in the three inscriptions where wives of synagogue heads are named (CII 265, 553, 744), they do not in fact bear the title of their husbands. In other words, there is no case where both husband and wife are called synagogue heads. Where women are called synagogue heads, we have no evidence that they were even married at the time of the inscription.

No less questionable is the thesis of the brothers Reinach that in the later period the title was honorific for both women and men. From the survey of the evidence for synagogue heads it



is evident that no ancient sources allude to this possibility. Indeed, as discussed above, we cannot assume that such honorific titles even existed in the ancient synagogue. Further, it is rather unclear what is meant by "late." Since Salomon Reinach dates the Rufina inscription to not before the third century, one wonders how he would deal, for example, with the fourth-century references in the Theodosian Code to heads of the synagogue (16.8.4 [331]; 16.8.13 [397]; 16.8.14 [399]) or with CII 803 from Apamea in Syria dated to 391 and mentioning synagogue heads. These can certainly not be said to be honorific titles, and yet they probably post-date the Rufina inscription. One has the suspicion that the theory of the later development into an honorific title was created expressly for the purpose of interpreting the Rufina inscription and then came in quite handy for the Theopempte inscription when it was discovered some years later. In any case, there is no support for this theory in the literary and inscriptional evidence surveyed.

As for the argument that the titles must be honorific by virtue of the femininity of the holders, it is difficult to discuss this in a few sentences. In a sense it is much more honest than the two theories just presented, for the author states his basic assumption clearly and without embellishment. It forces the discussion to where it should be, namely at the question of whether it is inconceivable that a woman was a leader in the ancient synagogue. We are in possession of three ancient inscriptions in which women bear the title head of the synagogue. It is our task to interpret these in the context of other ancient references to women officers of the synagogue. If the presupposition is that a woman was not capable of fulfilling the office of synagogue head or that the ancient synagogue considered all women, *qua* women, incapable or unfit, then one must produce a plausible explanation for the existence of these three inscriptions. They themselves call into question certain presuppositions about the history of Jewish women.

It is true that there are certain indications that women's lives were restricted in a number of ways in ancient Judaism, but a word of caution is in order here. Modern scholarship does not possess the Jewish literature which would be the proper companion to our inscriptions, namely Graeco-Jewish literature from the early Byzantine period from Asia Minor or Crete or even any Graeco-Jewish literature from this period or even any Jewish literature from Asia Minor or Crete.

Rather than trying to fit these inscriptions into our pre-conceived notions of what women were (and are) and of what Judaism was, would it not be more reasonable to take these inscriptions as a challenge to our pre-conceptions, as traces of a Judaism of which we know very little? It is, of course, not sufficient simply to make counter-assertions to the statement that archisynagogos was a purely honorific title when borne by women. It is necessary to produce a counter-reconstruction which is more convincing than the view that these women did nothing.

I propose the following reconstruction. Women synagogue heads, like their male counterparts, were active in administration and exhortation. They may have worked especially with women, although we should not assume that they worked only with women. Perhaps they looked after the financial affairs of the synagogue, administering it as Rufina administered her large household; perhaps they exhorted their congregations, reminding them to keep the sabbath as had the synagogue head in Luke 13:14 before them. We must assume that they had a knowledge of the Torah in order to be able to teach and exhort others in it.

Rufina, Sophia and Theopempte could have worked in a team of two or three synagogue heads, for we have seen that the number was not necessarily restricted to one. Or perhaps they served alone. A community like Myndos could well have selected Theopempte, a woman who had donated to the synagogue, possibly a widow at this time, as its sole archisynagogos. And perhaps the Jewish congregation in Smyrna considered itself fortunate to have such an able administrator as Rufina as its sole synagogue head. Whether they served alone or with others we cannot say; either is possible.

How did these women come to this high office? Rufina, for example, was wealthy. Perhaps she came from a leading and learned Jewish family, and the congregation honored her with this office much as they would have honored her brother. Or possibly she was the daughter of a leading Roman family, as the name suggests, and the congregation wished to honor a high-born newcomer to Judaism with a responsibility worthy of her descent. Theopempte also had certain funds at her disposal. Had she shown such an active interest in seeing the new synagogue built that the congregation rewarded her with this office? Sophia of Gortyn, both elder and head of the synagogue, must have been very actively involved in the affairs of the synagogue. Was it her long years of work that convinced even the most skeptical that a woman was capable of filling that office? Family ties, long

years of active involvement, largesse--these have often played a role in attaining various offices and seem as likely in the case of women as of men. Whether they were appointed or elected we do not know.

The final key to the interpretation of these three inscriptions, as well as of those which follow, lies in accepting this reconstruction as historically plausible, or in refuting it as historically impossible.



## CHAPTER II

### WOMAN AS LEADER

#### A. The Inscriptional Evidence for a Woman as Leader

One of the more recent additions to our knowledge of women leaders in ancient Judaism is the Peristeria inscription, first published in 1937, from the area of Thebes in Phthiotis in Thessaly.

Thebes in Phthiotis (Thessaly)

CII 696b.<sup>1</sup> A kioniskos (also called columella: a small column, flat on top and without a capital, used as a gravestone<sup>2</sup>) with the symbol of the seven-branched menorah.

Μνημα  
2 Περιστερίας  
ἀρχη-  
4 γίσσης.

Ll. 3-4: read ἀρχηγίσσης (genitive of ἀρχηγίσσα).

Tomb of Peristeria, leader.

G. Sotirou, who discovered the inscription, took peristeria to be a common noun (cf. peristera, "pigeon," "dove"), and Archēgisis to be the name of the deceased.<sup>3</sup> Louis Robert<sup>4</sup> suggested the interpretation given above, on the basis that a common noun peristeria is inexplicable here. Robert explains the proper name Peristeria as one of the Greek personal names formed from the names of animals, comparing it to Peristera (from peristera).<sup>5</sup> The title archēgissa he explains as the feminine equivalent of the term archēgos<sup>6</sup> which occurs on a Jewish gold medallion now at the Jewish Museum in London.

CII 731g.

Ἵπὲρ εὐχῆς Ἴ-  
2 ακωβ ἀρχιγού  
πινωνᾶ.

L. 2: read ἀρχιγού.

In accordance with a vow of Jacob, president, the setter of pearls.