

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 [αὐ]τοῦ 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>