

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.¹ A kioniskos (also called columella: a small column, flat on top and without a capital, used as a gravestone²) 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.³ Louis Robert⁴ 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).⁵ The title archēgissa he explains as the feminine equivalent of the term archēgos⁶ 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 ἀρχηγού.

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

Robert points out that although archēgos is not attested elsewhere as a Jewish title, the Latin principalis, which occurs in an inscription from Moesia, could be a parallel:

CII 681.

Ioses arcisna
2 et principales
filius Maximini
4 Pannoni sibi et
Qyriae coiugi
6 sui vivo suo me-
moria dedica-
vit.

L. 1: read arcisynagogus (ἀρχισυνάγωγος).
L. 2: read principalis.
L. 5: read coniugi.
Ll. 6-7: read suae vivo se memoriam.⁷

Ioses, head of the synagogue and leader, son of Maximinus Pannonus, dedicated this monument, while still alive, for his wife and himself.

Thus, Robert considers the title archēgissa to be the female equivalent of archēgos, which occurs only once in the Jewish inscriptions, but has its Latin equivalent in principalis. Robert is in no way disturbed by an ancient Jewish woman bearing an official title; on the contrary, he refers to other Jewish women bearing titles in inscriptions.

Robert's suggestion that Peristeria is a proper noun and archēgissa a title is convincing. In order to interpret archēgissa in the context of ancient Judaism, a study of possible meanings is required. Since archēgissa is, to my knowledge, a hapax legomenon, the search for its meaning must concentrate on archēgos (m. and f.), the word from which it was derived.

The only other Jewish inscription found on this site, CII 696a, a stele with a seven-branched menorah, a lulav and a dove, does not provide further information about the organizational structure of the congregation:

Μνήμα Σαου-
2 λ καὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ
γαμετῆς Ἀννας.

The tomb of Saul and his wife Anna.

**B. Archēgos in Ancient Literature
and Inscriptions**

Archēgos appears both as an adjective, meaning "beginning," "originating," "primary," "leading," "chief," and as a noun,

meaning "founder" (as of a family), "ancestral heroine," "prince," "chief," "first cause," "originator" or "originating power."⁸ An archēgos could be a deity, and thus Plato reports that the Egyptians said that Neith was the founder of Sais in Egypt, while the Greeks said it was Athena,⁹ and the daughters of Ascopus (Salamis, Aegina, Thebe, Sinope, etc.) were considered to be the ancestral heroines of cities.¹⁰ Archēgos could also be the human ancestor of a tribe or family.¹¹ The word can also mean "leader," and it is in this sense that Eusebius calls his opponent Marcellus "leader of the godless heretics,"¹² and an inscription from Dijon, France refers to a man named Chyndonax as archēgos of the priests (CIG 6798).

In the LXX, archēgos translates a number of Hebrew words, but most often r'ōš, in the sense of military, political or clan leader (Exod 6:14; Num 13:3; 14:4; 25:4; Deut 33:21; Judg 9:44; 1 Chr 5:24; 8:28; 12:21; Neh 7:70-71; 11:16-17; Lam 2:10). Archēgos as a translation of qāšīn, "chief," "ruler" (Judg 11:6, 11; Isa 3:6,7) and šar, "prince," "official," "governor" (Judg 5:15; 1 Chr 26:26; Neh 2:9; Isa 30:4) is also relatively frequent. Josephus uses archēgos five times, three times in the sense "originator," "author" (of crimes: Ant. 7.9.3§207; of trouble: Ant. 20.6.3§136; of legal violations: Ag. Ap. 1.270), and twice in the sense of "ancestor," "founder of our race" (Ag. Ap. 1.71,130). Philo uses archēgos in the meaning "leader," "chief" (Leg. alleg. 3.175 [Num 14:4; Hebrew: r'ōš]; De somn. 1.89 [Num 25:4; Hebrew: r'ōš hā'am]); much more common in Philonic usage is the related archēgetēs, which refers to Adam as the founder of the human race (De opific. 79,136,142), Seth, "the head of our race" (De poster. 42), God, as the originator of the universe (De ebriet. 42), the twelve sons of Jacob (De fuga 73), etc.

In the NT Christ is the archēgos, i.e., originator of life (Acts 3:15), of salvation (Heb 2:10), and of faith (Heb 12:2), as well as archēgos kai sōtēr, i.e., leader and savior (Acts 5:31).

This survey has yielded three basic meanings of archēgos:

1. ancestral hero or heroine, founder;
2. originator;
3. leader, chief.

C. The Meaning of archēgissa/archēgos in Jewish Inscriptions

For the two archēgissa/archēgos inscriptions (CII 696b, 731g), the second meaning cannot apply, for one must be the originator of something, and in neither inscription is there a

genitive to indicate that something. The third meaning, "leader," "chief" is a plausible one, although it is not possible to define it more accurately in relation to other Jewish offices. If, as Robert has suggested,¹³ archēgos is the equivalent of principalis (CII 681), then archēgos is not a substitute for archisynagōgos, because the Ioses of CII 681 bears both titles: arcisina(gogus) et principal(i)s. However, since Jewish titles differed from locality to locality, archēgissa/archēgos may in fact have been the equivalent of archisynagōgissa/archisynagōgos in Peristeria's (CII 696b) or in Jacob's (CII 731g) community. Since there is no further indication either in the inscriptions themselves or in Jewish literature, one cannot decide definitively whether archēgissa/archēgos means leader of the Jewish civic community or of the worship congregation, but this distinction would apply only in areas where these two were not the same. Perhaps the Jewish community in Thebes in Phthiotis was so small that this distinction is irrelevant.

Given the background of the term archēgos, however, another meaning also presents itself. We have seen that archēgos in the sense of "ancestor," "founder" was widespread among both Jews and non-Jews, whereby the reference was nearly always to an ancestral figure or to a deity. Could it be that archēgissa/archēgos meant "founder of the Jewish community" in a particular city? One must admit that this would be a somewhat new meaning for this term, a further development of the meaning "ancestral founder" of a city, a clan, a race, but in a time in which Judaism was still a missionary religion, it is possible that the founder of a community could have been a revered figure, and by this title, have been compared to the ancestral founders of cities, families, etc. In the writings of the Jewish-Christian Paul, one finds traces of the reverence in which he, as the founder of a Christian community or as the one who had baptized a particular individual, was held or expected to be held (e.g., 1 Thess 2:9-12; 4:1-2; Phlm 10).¹⁴

While the idea that a woman might have founded a Jewish community might seem absurd at first glance, seen in the light of ancient Jewish proselytism, it is not implausible. Scholars have recognized for some time that women proselytes are mentioned relatively frequently in ancient sources.¹⁵ If numbers of women were converting to Judaism, it is not impossible to imagine that one woman could have been the first in her community to convert and could have been active in persuading others to do so as well. Proselytizing activity by women, if it indeed existed, would have been similar to the work of such Jewish-Christian women as

Priscilla and Junia, both of whom seem to have been active missionaries. Priscilla,¹⁶ who together with her husband Aquila had a house church (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19), was a teacher in the early church (Acts 18:26--notice the synagogue context) and an important co-worker of Paul (Acts 18:2-3,18; Rom 16:3-5; 1 Cor 16:19; see also 2 Tim 4:19). The Jewish-Christian woman Junia (Rom 16:7) bore the title apostolos,¹⁷ which implied active missionary work. (See esp. 1 Cor 9.)¹⁸ Another important parallel, although non-Jewish, would be Thekla, probably the most well known of early Christian women missionaries.¹⁹

If archegissa were to have meant "founder," then we would have to imagine the same type of leadership in Peristeria that we encounter in Priscilla or Junia. Thekla would be a parallel case as to proselytizing activity, although she is described as being more counter-cultural than a Jewish archegissa may have been.

In sum, while it is impossible to ascertain more accurately what functions the title archegissa/archegos implied, other passages in which the term occurs indicate that "leader" is an accurate translation. "Founder," which emerged as a second possible meaning is an intriguing possibility which must remain uncertain.

CHAPTER III

WOMEN AS ELDERS

A. The Inscriptional Evidence for Women as Elders

Six ancient Greek inscriptions have been found in which women bear the title "elder" (presbytera/presbyteressa = presbyterissa). In addition to these, there exists one Greek inscription in which a woman is called PRESBYTNS (sic), most likely presbytis.

Kastelli Kissamou, Crete

CII 731c.¹ White marble sepulchral plaque (45 x 30 x 2.8 cm; height of letters: 1.5-3 cm; distance between lines: .5-1.5 cm; 4th/5th C.).

Σοφία Γορτυνί-
2 α, πρεσβυτέρα
κὲ ἀρχισυναγώ-
4 γισσα Κισάμου ἔν-
θα. Μνήμη δικέας
6 ἕως αἰῶνα. Ἀμήν.

L. 3: read καί.
L. 5: read δικαίας.
L. 6: read εἰς αἰῶνα.

Sophia of Gortyn, elder and head of the synagogue of Kisamos (lies) here. The memory of the righteous one for ever. Amen.

This inscription was discussed above in the context of heads of the synagogue.² Important for the interpretation of the title presbytera is its parallelization with archisynagōgissa, which makes it unlikely that presbytera is simply a term meant to distinguish Sophia the elder from a Sophia the younger.

Bizye, Thrace

CII 692.³ Grey marble stele (width: .23 m; broken off below the lettering; height of letters: 2.5 cm.; no earlier than 4th/5th C.); above the inscription a seven branched menorah and an ethrog.

Ethrog Menorah

Μνήμη(μ-) σι
2 α Ρεβεκα[ς]
τῆς πρεσ-