

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 ἀρχιγού.

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,