

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 ἕς ἰώνα. Ἀμήν.

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

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 ῥεβεκα[ς]
τῆς πρεσ-

4 Βυτέρως τ-
 ἥς κεκοιμημ-
 6 ἔνης.

- L. 1: ligature between **Μ**, **Ν**, and **Η**.
 L. 3: ligature between **Η** and **Ϛ**.
 L. 5: ligature between **Η** and **Μ**.
 Ll. 5-6: read κεκοιμημένης (The **υ** for **ου** is one reason for the late dating.)

Tomb of Rebeka, the elder, who has fallen asleep.

Whereas the original editors of the inscription, R. M. Dawkins and F. W. Hasluck, see a connection between presbytera here and archisynagōgos in the Rufina inscription from Smyrna (CII 741), Jean-Baptiste Frey argues that "elder" here either simply distinguishes this Rebeka from another, younger Rebeka or that it designates the wife of an elder, that is, of a member of the local gerousia.⁴ Samuel Krauss also suggests that the title "elder" when applied to women could mean that the woman was the wife of an elder.⁵ Jean Juster believes that "elder" when applied to women was probably a "simple title" accorded to women who were "pious and venerated in the community."⁶ We have seen this kind of argumentation in the context of the other titles borne by women. It is therefore not necessary to quote further secondary authors on this point; the line of argumentation is nearly always the same.

This is the only Jewish inscription from Bizye, so one can say nothing about the Jewish community there or its form of organization. As the inscription itself gives no further information about Rebeka, nothing of her background or status can be known.

Venosa, Apulia

Three Greek inscriptions found in a Jewish catacomb in Venosa (ancient Venusia) in Apulia, which is in southern Italy, mention women elders. They probably date from the third to the sixth centuries.

CII 581; CIL IX 6226⁷.

Τάφος
 2 Βερωνικε-
 νις πρεσβιτέ-
 4 ρες ετ φιλια
 Ἰωσεταις.

Ll. 3-4: read: πρεσβυτέρας.

L. 4: ετ φιλια = Latin et filia (should be et filiae).

Tomb of Beronikene,⁸ elder and daughter of Ioses.

Note that Beronikene's father bears no title and that she is described as the daughter of her father rather than as the wife of a given man.

CII 590; CIL IX 6230⁹. Painted in red letters on the stucco covering of the wall of the grave.

Τάφος
2 Μαννινες πρεσ-
βιτέρες τιγάτερ Δου-
4 γινι πατέρις ίνγόνιν
Φαστινι πατέρις
6 έτ[ω]ν λη'.

L. 1: read Τάφος.

L. 2: read Μαννινης.

Ll. 2-3: read πρεσβυτέρας θυγάτηρ.

Ll. 3-4: Δουγινι = Latin Longini (gen. of Longinus).

L. 4: read έγγόνιον.

Tomb of Mannine,¹⁰ elder, daughter of Longinus, father, granddaughter of Faustinus, father, (aged) 38 years.

Mannine was 38 years old at her death; she is the only woman elder whose age we know. The title patēr, borne by the father and the grandfather, is known from other Venosan inscriptions (CII 599, 611 twice, 612, 613 twice, 619c, 619d).¹¹ The constellation of Mannine, presbytera, Longinus, patēr, and Faustinus, patēr, makes it unlikely that Mannine's title simply means "aged woman" (which would also be precluded by her age at death) or is meant to distinguish her from a younger Mannine. Perhaps Mannine's appointment or election was not unrelated to her family background. The inscription shows, however, that her father's title had not passed down automatically to her, for her title is not the same as her father's.

CII 597; CIL IX 6209.¹² Painted in red letters on the stucco covering of the wall of the grave.

Τάφος Φα-
2 οστινες πρεσ-
βιτερες. δλθ

Ll. 1-3: read Φαστινης πρεσβυτέρας.

Tomb of Faustina. Peace.

This name, sometimes spelled slightly differently, is quite common at Venosa (CII 569, 578, 590, 591, 593, 598, 599, 600, 601, 611 three times, 612, 613 twice, 619d), and a good number of these persons are title-bearers (CII 590, 599, 600, 611 twice, 612, 613 twice, 619d). Perhaps Faustina's title was not unrelated to her family background.

It is striking that three of the five extant presbytera inscriptions are from Venosa. CII 606 (Alexsanra, pateressa) and CII 619d (Faustina, mētēr), which are discussed below, are also from Venosa, giving a total of five women title-bearers from one town. Although the total number of Venosan inscriptions is considerable (CII 569-619; 619a-619e), and although the number five is certainly not high enough to speak of "equal access" for women and men, the concentration of these five inscriptions in one catacomb is striking enough to suggest that the Venosan community may have had a tradition of granting women official functions.

The masculine presbyteros occurs only once at Venosa (CII 595).¹³ The inscription is a strange mixture of Hebrew and Greek written in Hebrew characters, and the elder in question bears the Latin name Secundinus. The elder's wife, Materina, bears no title.

Oea, Tripolitania

SEG 27(1977) no. 1201.¹⁴ Inscription on a loculus in a Jewish catacomb; text lined up in three columns, above which is a menorah and a lulav and between which are two palm branches (4th/5th C. C.E., possibly later).

I	II	III
<u>Menorah Lulav</u>		
Μνήμη- 2 η τῆς Μακαρίας	Μαζαυζαλα 2 πρεσβετέ- ρησα ἔζησε 4 εαυτου ἱ	ἀναπαυσης 2 ὁ θε̅ μετὰ τῶ ὀσίων κ μ τῶ δικ- 4 ἔω.
Palm Branch	Palm Branch	
I, l. 3: read Μακαρίας (or: μακαρίας).	II, l. 1: read Μαζαυζαλας.	II, ll. 2-3: read πρεσβυτέρισσας.
II, l. 4: read ἐνιαυτούς (?);	III, l. 1: read ἀνάπαυσις.	III, ll. 2-4: read ὁ θεός μετὰ τῶν ὀσίων καὶ μετὰ τῶν δικαίων.

Tomb of Makaria (or: the blessed) Mazauzala, elder. She lived [. . .] years. Rest. God is with the holy and the righteous ones.

This inscription was found in Libya in a Jewish catacomb which was destroyed during World War II. The primary difficulty of interpretation is found in II, l. 4, the meaning of which must remain uncertain; the connection between II, l. 4 and III, l. 1 is also rather unclear. Mazauzala is probably a Libyan name.¹⁵ This need not imply that the woman was a convert, for Jews in antiquity bore a wide variety of names. The title presbeteressa¹⁶ is similar in form to archisynagōgissa in CII 73lc.¹⁷ Three other inscriptions are known from the same catacomb, but they add little to our knowledge of the Jewish community there.¹⁸

Rome

CII 400.¹⁹ Marble plaque, broken in two pieces. Letters engraved and painted in red. Found in the Monteverde catacomb (1st C. B.C.E. - 3rd C. C.E.)

Ενθ(ά)δε
2 κείται Σα-
ρα Ούρα π-
4 πρεσβύτ(ι)ς

Menorah

L. 1: text has ΕΝΘΑΔΕ.
L. 2: read κείται.
L. 3: Müller suggests Ούρα.²⁰
Ll. 3-4: text has ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΝΕ, probably πρεσβύτις (f.)
but could also be πρεσβύτης (m. or f.).

Here lies Sara Ura, elder (or aged woman).

The male presbys can be used much like presbyteros,²¹ and perhaps the female form used here also means more than simply "aged woman." A possible parallel could be the Christian order of presbytides, which was forbidden by the Council of Laodicea.²²

These six, possibly seven, inscriptions form the evidence for Jewish women elders. The geographical spread is greater than for women heads or mothers of the synagogue, with one inscription from Crete, one from Thrace, one from the province of Tripolitania in North Africa, one from Rome, and three from southern Italy. The inscriptions themselves teach us little about the women themselves and nothing about the title presbytera/presbyteressa (or presbytis). The only age given (38 for Mannine) would seem to preclude the meaning "aged woman." The parallelization of presbytera and archisynagōgissa in CII 73lc is further support for presbytera being an official title. The inscriptions themselves give no indication that these women were the wives of elders, for no husbands are mentioned.

If the title presbytera/presbyteressa implied a function, what could that function have been? As with the other titles, an analysis of the functions of male elders can shed light on the duties and rights of female elders.

B. The Meaning of "Elder"

1. Literary References to the Title

Of the various titles occurring in ancient inscriptions, "elder" is one of the most difficult to define precisely, for in the course of its long history the title took on rather different meanings.²³ "Elder" could denote a political function, as in the "elders of Israel" (Num 11:16-30; 2 Sam 3:17; 5:3; 17:4, etc.). It sometimes included judicial functions, as in the "elders of the city" (Deut 19:12; 21:2-9,19-20; 22:15-21; 25:7-9). Philo (In Flacc. 74,76,80; Leg. ad Gaium 229) and Josephus (J.W. 7.10.1 §412) speak of the gerousia of Alexandria, a body which would have had representative political (and religious?) functions; it is not certain, however, that the members of this gerousia were called presbyteroi.²⁴ The New Testament regularly refers to members of a group in the Sanhedrin as "elders" (Matt 16:21; Mark 8:31; 11:27; Luke 9:22, etc.). According to a saying in the Talmud, "elder means nothing other than scholar" (b. Qidd. 32b). The Theodosian Code (16.8.2,13,14) speaks of "elders" as if they were synagogue officials. A further complication arises from the possibility that presbyteroi is equal in meaning to such terms as seniores²⁵ or maiores.²⁶ It is this spectrum of meanings and possible synonyms which makes it very difficult to utilize ancient literature to help define the title presbytera/presbyteros as it occurs in our inscriptions. For the following, those parallels are preferred which are closest chronologically, geographically and linguistically to the presbytera/presbyteressa inscriptions. The following passages do not all necessarily refer only to male elders; women could be included in some of them.

The oldest presbyteros inscription is CII 1404 (the Theodotos inscription²⁷), a pre-70 Palestinian inscription written in Greek. We have seen that the geographical range of the title was considerable, and that the chronological extension was well into the Byzantine era. Thus, New Testament references would be quite appropriate as parallels. Luke 7:3-5 is of special interest, for it could well be a close parallel to the Theodotos inscription: