

Elders appear often in a specifically religious context.

The Roman lawgiver appears to have viewed Jewish elders primarily as religious functionaries, as a Jewish counterpart to Christian clerics (Cod. Theod. 16.8.13). In addition to functions relating specifically to the worship service (Corp. Iur. Civ., Nov. 146.1), the collecting of money in the synagogue to be sent to the patriarch (Cod. Theod. 16.8.14) must also be seen as a religious function. Judicial functions (Cod. Theod. 16.8.2; Cod. Iust. 1.9.15) could be viewed as secular activity, but to the extent that for Jews to live by their own law is a religious issue, this, too, must be seen as religious. Special seating arrangements during the worship service (t. Meg. 4.21, etc.) also point to a religious context for the elders' activities. The rabbinic definition of an elder as a scholar (b. Qidd. 32b), if this was shared by Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews, is further support for a religious locus of their activity. Given the title's background as a political, civic term, it should not be excluded that elders also had political, representative functions, but the texts cited show that one could not argue that they had only civic functions and not religious ones.

Whether the elders of our inscriptions were ordained or not cannot be known.

There is no positive evidence that they were, and rabbinic sources (e.g., y. Bik. 65d.11-15; b. Sanh. 14a) claim that ordination was limited to the Holy Land.

4. The Role of Women Elders

It should not be necessary to discuss once again the question of whether presbytera was an honorific title or not. The line of argumentation is the same as for the other titles borne by women. The person fully convinced that women could not have had official functions in the ancient synagogue is likely to remain unconvinced by all evidence to the contrary, and will argue that these women elders were wives of elders or older women (in spite of Mannine's age of thirty-eight in CII 590 and of the parallelization of presbytera and archisynagogissa in CII 731c, and in spite of the fact that no husbands appear in the inscriptions) or simply honorific elders. A. E. Harvey, for example, writing in 1974, notes, ". . . there are several Jewish tombstones in Italy and Asia Minor bearing the word $\pi\rho\epsilon\sigma\beta\acute{\upsilon}\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma$, but some of them must be purely honorific (four are in the

feminine!). . . ."56 To those willing to accept the possibility that the six, possibly seven, inscriptions in which women bear the title "elder" are evidence that ancient Jewish women could fulfill certain official functions, the following reconstruction is suggested.

Jewish women elders were most likely members of a council of elders. This council may have had some oversight of synagogue finances; until 399 elders annually collected money in the synagogue to be sent to the patriarchs. We should imagine that women elders were as involved in these financial matters as their male counterparts. If the women elders of our inscriptions were members of synagogues in which the elders sat in the front facing the people, then we should assume that these women sat among their colleagues facing the people. Although some may find it difficult to imagine that women could have been full members of a judicial council, the existence of the presbytera inscriptions at least raises this question. Could Jewish women actually have been scholars? Could they have had some say about the reading of the bible in the synagogue? Again, the technical terminology of our inscriptions raises these possibilities. Those maintaining their impossibility should at least consider how limited our knowledge of Jewish women in ancient Crete, Thrace, Italy and Libya actually is.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN AS MOTHERS OF THE SYNAGOGUE

A. The Evidence for Mothers of the Synagogue

1. The Inscriptional Evidence

There exist two Greek inscriptions in which the title mētēr synagogēs occurs (reconstructed), one Greek inscription in which a woman bears the title mētēr, two Latin inscriptions in which the title mater synagogae occurs, and one Latin inscription in which a woman bears the unusual title pateressa. All six of the inscriptions are from Italy, three being from Rome, two from Venosa in Apulia and one from Venetia in Brescia. They range in date from around the second century C.E. until perhaps as late as the sixth century.

Rome

CII 523 (= CIL VI 29756).¹ Sarcophagus fragment decorated by a shofar, a lulav and a seven-branched menorah; known since the late sixteenth century, but no longer extant. Date unknown. The manuscripts differ on points of spelling; for the variants see CII, ad loc. The text of Leon is:

Beturia Pau-
2 lla F domi
heterne quos-
4 tituta que bi-
xit an(nos) LXXXVI meses VI
6 proselyta an(norum) XVI
nomine Sara mater
8 synagogarum Campi
et Bolumni
10 en irenae ai cymysis
autis.

Shofar Lulav Menorah

L. 3: read aeternae con-.

L. 4: read quae vi-.

L. 5: read menses.

Ll. 10-11: read ἐν εἰρήνῃ (ἡ) κοίμησις αὐτῆς.

Veturia Paulla F(?), consigned to her eternal home, who lived 86 years, 6 months, a proselyte of 16 years, named Sara, mother of the synagogues of Campus and Volumnius. In peace her sleep.²