

and 619c, should caution us from making too quick an identification between father/mother and patron.

Father/mother is one of the more common titles among the Jewish Venosan inscriptions. Patēr/pater occurs nine times outside of our inscription,<sup>34</sup> while mētēr and pateressa occur one time each. Of the ten patres mentioned among the Venosan inscriptions, seven are named Faustinus, and the mother in CII 619d is named Faustina. This may indicate that they were all from the same family (see especially CII 611 and 613 for the passing down of names) and that the name Faustinus/a was as important a factor in attaining this title as any individual leadership skills a person might possess. In fact, Faustina may even have been named mother on the basis of the family into which she was born, most likely the same basis for success as that of the men named Faustinus in arriving at their office, rather than the family into which she married.

The twelve occurrences of the title pater/patēr/mētēr/pateressa indicate that it played a central role in the Jewish community at Venosa. Unfortunately, the inscriptions do not give us any indication of the actual function involved. Leon posits, "It is not improbable, therefore [because the title was common at Venosa], that the Venusian pater was a board member."<sup>35</sup> This seems plausible. One would only want to add that it is also not improbable that Alexsanra, pateressa (CII 606), and Faustina, mother (CII 619d) were also members of the board.

## 2. The Literary Evidence

There is one literary reference to Jewish mothers of the synagogue. It occurs in a Christian anti-Jewish polemic entitled De Altercatione Ecclesiae et Synagogae.<sup>36</sup> The work is a dialogue between two matrons, Synagoga and Ecclesia, in which a number of controversial points are discussed. In the context of a discussion of circumcision in which Church argues that circumcision cannot be the sign of salvation, because if this were the case, women, who do not receive circumcision, could not be saved, we read: ". . . what will your virgins do, what your widows, what even your mothers of the synagogue, if you bear witness that the sign of circumcision has helped the people to eternal life?" (*quid facient virgines tuae, quid facient viduae, quid matres etiam synagogae*).<sup>37</sup> The argument is that not only will normal Jewish women be excluded from eternal life if circumcision is the sign of eternal life, but that even the most outstanding women of the Jewish community, the mothers of the synagogue, will be

excluded. This Christian document thus attests that the title "mother of the synagogue" was sufficiently widespread to be known outside of Jewish circles and could be used as in some sense synonymous with "leading Jewish women." From the rhetorical standpoint, the title had to be vested with some authority or the sarcasm implicit in quid matres etiam synagogae would not have carried.

The careful work of dating and ascertaining the provenance of the De Altercatione Ecclesiae et Synagogae remains to be done. Jean Juster dates it from 438 to 476.<sup>38</sup> We would thus have a fifth-century literary attestation of the title "mother of the synagogue," which fits in well with the inscriptional evidence. Bernhard Blumenkranz suggests that the work may have originated in Spain or in Gaul, but in any case in an area which had only recently been assumed into "Romania," because Synagogue claims that Church was still living like a barbarian at a time when Synagogue already possessed Roman citizenship and was fighting wars.<sup>39</sup>

## B. The Meaning of "Mother/Father" and "Mother/Father of the Synagogue"

### 1. The Received Scholarly Opinion

The scholarly consensus is that both "mother of the synagogue" and "father of the synagogue" were honorific titles. It is my belief that this view arose because "mother of the synagogue" inscriptions have been known since the fifteenth (CII 639) and sixteenth (CII 523) centuries. That is, scholars have been faced for some centuries with the dilemma of women bearing this title. Rather than admit that the title signified a function, thereby allowing women into the ranks of synagogue leadership, they proposed that both fathers and mothers of the synagogue were honored members, but nothing more. Samuel Krauss's argumentation is quite specific in this respect: "A genuine office could not have been associated with the distinction [of father/mother of the synagogue] for the simple reason that it was also bestowed upon women."<sup>40</sup> The few scholars who have gone beyond the view of an honorific title have, unfortunately, produced speculations based on little evidence. Abraham Berliner, for example, suggested that the pater synagogae was the parnas (administrator of charities) of the older period, later called gabba'y. He was to care for the sick and dying and to make the necessary arrangements for funerals.<sup>41</sup> The mater synagogae, which is the same as pateressa, was responsible for