

CHAPTER V

WOMEN AS PRIESTS

A. The Inscriptional Evidence for Female Priests

There exist three ancient Jewish inscriptions in which a woman bears the title hiercia/hierissa. They range in age from the first century B.C.E. through possibly the fourth century C.E. and were found in Tell el-Yahudiyyeh in Lower Egypt, in Beth She'arim in Galilee, and in Rome.

Tell el-Yahudiyyeh

CII 1514 (SEG 1 [1923] no. 574). Rectangular stele, 45 cm in height, 22 cm in breadth, with an indented space ruled for the inscription, but without architectural decoration.

Μαριν
2 ἱέρισα χο-
ηστή πα-
4 σφιλε κ-
αί ἄλυπε κ-
6 αὶ φιλογίτ-
ων χαῖρε, ὥ-
8 ς ἔτων ν'.
L γ' Καίσαρ Π-
10 αῦνι γι'.

L. 9: read λυκάβαντος γ' Καίσαρος.

O Marin, priest, good and a friend to all, causing pain to no one and friendly to your neighbors, farewell! (She died at the age of) approximately fifty years, in the third year of Caesar (Augustus), on the thirteenth day of Payni (= June 7, 28 B.C.E.).

C. C. Edgar, who first published the inscription in 1922, thought that IERISA was "the name of Marion's father; whether it is an indeclinable noun or whether this is a genitive in -α I do not know."¹ Edgar thus thought that Marion's father's name was Ierisas or Ierisa. This rather strange interpretation of a not uncommon Greek noun was corrected the following year by Hans Lietzmann, who recognized it to be hieris(s)la, "priestess" (Priesterin).² The name Marin is a form of Marion³ and also occurs in other Greek inscriptions.⁴

This is one of eighty Jewish inscriptions found in a Jewish necropolis in Tell el-Yahudiyyeh.⁵ Many of the inscriptions are dated; CII 1466, 1492, 1493, 1498 are also from the time of

Augustus. The terminology (chrēstē, pasiphile, alypos) and form of our inscriptions (name followed by adjectives, chaire, approximate age at death, year, day of Egyptian month) are very similar to the terminology and form of the other Tell el-Yahudiyyeh inscriptions, both of those from the time of Augustus and of the others, which range from the second century B.C.E. through the first century C.E.

As with the other inscriptions in which women bear titles, modern scholars have been at pains to point out that hierisa here has no real meaning, e.g., Jean-Baptiste Frey, "This is not to say that Marin had an actual function as a priestess in the Jewish community, but rather that she belonged to the descendants of Aaron, to the priestly family" ⁶

For the interpretation of hierisa, it is rather significant that the Marin inscription was found in Tell el-Yahudiyyeh, i.e., the ancient Leontopolis in the nome of Heliopolis, for it was in Leontopolis that Onias IV, the legitimate heir to the Jerusalem high priesthood, founded a Jewish temple during the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor and Cleopatra II (181-146 B.C.E.), when he saw that he had no chance of attaining the Jerusalem high priesthood due to events surrounding the Maccabean revolt. ⁷ He founded the temple, probably around 160 B.C.E., by renovating and purifying an Egyptian temple. (On the Onias temple, see Josephus, J.W. 1.1.1 § 33; 7.10.2-4 §§ 420-436; Ant. 12.9.7 §§ 387-388; 13.3.1-3 §§ 62-73; 13.10.4 § 285; 20.10.3 § 236.) Josephus reports (Ant. 13.3.3 § 73) that "Onias found some Jews who, like him, were priests and Levites to minister there" (εὗρε δὲ Ὀνίας καὶ Ἰουδαίους τινὰς δημοίους αὐτῷ καὶ ἱερεῖς καὶ λευίτας τοὺς ἐκεῖ θρησκέουσιντας, cf. Ant. 13.3.1 § 63; J.W. 7.10.3-4 §§ 430-434). The temple of Onias existed, and Jewish priests served at it, until 73 C.E. or shortly before 73, when the Romans closed it (Josephus, J.W. 7.10.2-4 §§ 420-436).

The later rabbis are still familiar with the temple of Onias, the sacrificial service of which they view with some ambivalence, but which they are willing to recognize as valid under certain limited circumstances. (See m. Menah. 13:10; t. Menah. 13.12-14 [Zuck. 533]; b. Meg. 10a; b. Menah. 109; y. Yoma 43c.64-43d.6; y. Sanh. 19a.9.) One should view the Onias temple in the context of other Jewish temples outside of Jerusalem. ⁸ The very existence of these various cultic sites raises the question of pluralism within the Jewish cult.

Rome

CII 315.⁹ Plaque of white marble, 19 cm in height, 35 cm in width, 3.7 cm in breadth, from the Monteverde catacomb in the Via Portuensis.

Ἐνθάδε κειτε

2 Γαυδεντία
 κδ'.
 ἑβδόμη ἐτῶν

Menorah

4 Ἐν ἱερῷ ἢ
 κοίμησις αὐ-

Torah Shrine

6 τῆς.

L. 1. read κείται.

L. 4. read ἐν ἱερῷ.

Here lies Gaudentia, priest, (aged) 24 years. In peace be her sleep!

On the basis of the form of the carved letters, in particular of the mu, which is nearly cursive, the inscription is probably from the third or fourth century C.E. The menorah and the Torah shrine (with open doors revealing five shelves and six compartments) attest to the Jewishness of the inscription. Torah shrines also occur on other Jewish inscriptions from the Monteverde catacomb (cf. CII 327[4th C.], 343, 401[3rd C.], 460[3rd/4th C.]). Müller and Bees suggest that the Torah shrine may be a special symbol of Gaudentia's priestly ancestry and that the Roman Jewish community, with its limited knowledge of Hebrew, may have identified ἱερῶν (Torah shrine) with Aaron. The depiction of an ἱερῶν would indicate descendancy from Aaron. Since, however, this is the only one of the Monteverde inscriptions embellished by a Torah shrine which was dedicated to a person of priestly class, their suggestion is not convincing. The Torah shrine, like the other Jewish symbols which ornament ancient epitaphs, may simply indicate that the deceased was Jewish.

The name Gaudentia¹⁰ also appears in another inscription from the Monteverde catacomb in the Via Portuensis, CII 314, where the bearer of the name is the daughter of a man named Oklatios. The male (?) form of the name, Galudentis (Gaudentios?), occurs in CII 316, which is also from the Monteverde catacomb.

Four, possibly five, men bear the title hiericus in inscriptions from the Monteverde catacomb: CII 346, 347 (twice), 375, 355 (?). These will be discussed below.¹¹

As for the meaning of hierisa, modern commentators follow the pattern we have seen elsewhere. Harry J. Leon writes:

One woman, Gaudentia (315), is styled a hierisa. This is apparently the equivalent of the Hebrew cohenet and probably designates the wife (or daughter) of a hiericus. It could hardly point to a priestly function for a woman, since no priestesses are to be found in the Jewish worship. Father Frey thought that the title must denote a feminine member of the priestly family of Aaron.¹²

Frey himself writes, "ἱέρεια, literally 'priestess,' cannot, in the present case, mean anything other than a member of the priestly family of Aaron."¹³

Beth She'arim

CII 1007.¹⁴ Painted in red above and to the right of arcosolium 2 of Hall K in Catacomb 1, 38 cm in length and 26 in height, with the height of the letters varying from 3 to 5 cm.

Σαρα θυγάτηρ
2 Ναιμίας μη-
τηρ ἱερέως
4 κύρα Μαρ[ε]λης
[ἔν]θα κ[ε]ῖται?].

L. 4. read κύρας.

Sara, daughter of Naimia, mother of the priest, Lady Maria, lies here.

The inscription should probably be dated to the fourth century C.E.¹⁵ Schwabe and Lifshitz argue that Sara's corpse had been brought from abroad, perhaps from Palmyra, for burial in Beth She'arim.¹⁶ The specific evidence for this case, however, namely nails and chips of wood found in her resting place, is not particularly convincing. The title kyra, "Lady," is not uncommon among the Greek inscriptions of Beth She'arim.¹⁷ The name of Sara's father, Naimia, is the equivalent of the Hebrew Nehemyah.¹⁸ Note that Sara's father is not called a priest.¹⁹ On the meaning of hierieia, Schwabe and Lifshitz write:

Particularly the use of the title ἱέρεια is most interesting. Sarah, the mother of Miriam the priestess, was not a priestess herself and neither was her daughter. Miriam was a cohenet, i.e., the wife of a cohen. The relatives of the deceased wanted to indicate in the epitaph that Sarah was the mother of a cohen's wife. We cannot find a better proof

of the high social status of the priests in the Jewish community.²⁰

Since Sara's father is not called a priest, it is indeed unlikely that Sara was the daughter of a priest, and therefore a priest herself. Why Maria, however, who is called a priest, should not after all be one, is unclear. The meaning of cohenet (kōhenet) will be discussed below.²¹

CII 1085. Frey, on the basis of a communication with Moshe Schwabe, gives the following transcription:

.... [τηρή[ως?]
2 καὶ Σάρα[ς θυγατρός?
N]αϊμίας καὶ ἰῶ.
4 Μαρῆ[ας]22

[Tomb of . . .], priest (?), and of Sara,
[daughter of?] Naimia and of Maria

Schwabe and Lifshitz (Beth She'arim no. 68) state that the inscription is set above an arcosolium in room III of Hall K in Catacomb 1, and is 26 cm in length and 10 cm in height, with the letters being 3 cm high. According to them, line 1 is incised, and lines 2-4 are painted in red. Their reading is:

Καὶ Σάρα [θυγά-]
2 [τηρ N]αϊμίας καὶ [μήτηρ?]
Μαρή[ας τερ]εψ[ας?]23

And Sara, daughter of Naimia and mother of the priest Maria.

Note that Frey has a line above the first line of Schwabe and Lifshitz. The difference between the two transcriptions should be sufficient evidence for the illegibility of this one inscription. A major difficulty with the Schwabe and Lifshitz transcription and reconstruction is that it is based on the assumption that two women, both by the name of Sara, both daughters of men named Naimia, and both mothers of priests named Maria, were buried at approximately the same time in the same hall, an assumption which is rather unlikely. Due to the uncertain reading of this inscription, it will not be considered as evidence for the title hierieia.

B. Possible Interpretations of hierieia/hierissa

There exist several possibilities for interpreting this term in our inscriptions:

1. Hiereia/hierissa is simply the Greek equivalent of kōhenet (Aramaic: kahantta?)

Kōhenet is not a biblical but a rabbinic term. Although linguistically kōhenet is the feminine of kōhēn (Aramaic: kahāna?), it is not exactly parallel in meaning to kōhēn. A man becomes a kōhēn in one way, by birth. Kōhēn can therefore be defined as "son of a kōhēn," who must, of course, be married to a Jewish woman.²⁴ A woman becomes a kōhenet in two ways, by birth and by marriage. Kōhenet can therefore be defined as "daughter of a kōhēn" (bat kōhēn) or as "wife of a kōhēn" (ʿešet kōhēn).

The priest's daughter²⁵ had certain priestly rights, such as the right to eat from the priestly dues, a right which is laid down in the Bible (Lev 22:12-13):

רבח כהן כי תהיה לאיש זר
הוא בתרומת הקדשים לא תאכל:
רבח כהן תהיה אלמנה וגרושה זורע אין לה
ושבה אל-בית אביה כנעוריה מלחם אביה תאכל
וכל-זר לא-יאכלו בו:

If a priest's daughter is married to an outsider she shall not eat of the offering of the holy things. But if a priest's daughter is a widow or divorced, and has no child, and returns to her father's house, as in her youth, she may eat of her father's food; yet no outsider shall eat of it.

The presupposition here is that the priest's daughter, while a child, may eat of the priestly offerings. Unlike her brother, however, the daughter of a priest can lose her right to eat of the priestly offerings by marrying a common Israelite; if he marries a common Israelite, he may continue to eat the priestly dues, but if she does so, she relinquishes that right. If she marries a priest, however, she may continue to eat of the priestly offering, but this right is a derived one, i.e., due to her priestly husband and not to her own priestly descentance (also a derivation, of course).

The Holiness Code in Leviticus places the sexual activity of priests' daughters and wives in the context of the holiness of the male priests. Lev 21:9 reads:

רבח איש כהן כי תחל לזנות אח אביה
היא מחללת באש תשרף:

And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire.

Thus, the holiness of the priest can be damaged by the sexual activity of his daughter; his holiness is to be preserved by executing the daughter whose sexual activity is not within the bounds of patriarchally-sanctioned marriage.

Similarly, the prospective wife of a priest must reflect his holiness (Lev 21:7):

אשה זנה וחללה לא יקח ואשה גרושה מאישה לא יקח
כי-קדש הוא לאלהיו.

The (priests) shall not marry a harlot or a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God.

The priest must marry a widow or a virgin to preserve his own holiness. A prostitute, a rape victim or a divorced woman would endanger his holiness. Ezekiel warns priests to marry only Israelite virgins, but allows them priests' widows (Ezek 44:22). The high priest is allowed to take only "a virgin of his own people, that he may not profane his children among his people" (Lev 21:14). The issue in these laws is the holiness of the priestly semen, which should not be allowed to enter a "vessel" previously profaned by pre- or extra-marital sexual intercourse, whether the intercourse had been forced or not. The distinction between the divorced woman and the priest's widow is not immediately clear; perhaps the divorced woman was considered more likely to engage in prostitution or other non-marital sexual intercourse than a widow, a view common in patriarchal societies.

The questions raised in these biblical laws, namely, the right to eat of the priestly dues and the profanation of the priest through his wife or daughter, form the background of much of the rabbinic discussion on the kōhenet. Further marriage limitations, i.e., limitations on who could become a kōhenet through marriage, are also spelled out. For example, a hālūṣā (a childless widow whose brother-in-law refused to marry her according to the duty of levirate marriage; see Deut 25:5-10) may be forbidden to a priest (m. Yebam. 2:4; cf. 1:4:²⁶ the School of Shammai forbids it; the School of Hillel allows it), as may a woman taken in levirate marriage (m. Yebam. 1:4: the School of Shammai allows it; the School of Hillel forbids it). A kōhenet who by accident (through a mix-up) had had intercourse with the wrong husband was also forbidden to marry a priest (m. Yebam. 3:10).

Lev 22:13 had already established that the daughter of a priest could lose her priestliness by marrying a non-priest. The

Mishnah (Yebam. 7:4-6) lists a number of further causes for which a bat kōhēn can lose her right to eat of the priestly heave-offering (tērūmā) or by which she may not attain it in the first place. For example, the brother-in-law whose duty it is to marry the widowed, childless bat kōhēn (m. Yebam. 7:4) is a hindrance for her; since she is bound to him, she cannot return to her father's house and eat the heave-offering. As we saw above, if her brother-in-law refuses to marry her, she becomes a hālūṣā and priests are forbidden to marry her; thus, she also loses the possibility of regaining the right to eat heave-offering by marrying a priest.

A central text on the kōhenet is m. Soṭa 3:7:

בח ישראל שנשאא לכהן, מנחה
נשרפה; וכהנת שנשאא לישראל,
מנחה נאכלת. מה-בין כהן
לכהנת? מנחה כהנת נאכלת, מנחה
כהן אינה נאכלת; כהנת מהחללה,
וכהן אין מתחלל; כהנת מטמאה
למחים, ואין כהן מטמא למחים;
כהן אוכל בקדשי קדשים, ואין
כהנת אוכלת בקדשי קדשים.

A daughter of an Israelite who is wed to a kōhēn: her meal-offering is burned; and a kōhenet (i.e., a daughter of a priest) who is wed to a common Israelite: her meal-offering is eaten.

In what manner does a kōhēn differ from a kōhenet? The meal-offering of a kōhenet is eaten, and the meal-offering of a kōhēn is not eaten; a kōhenet may forfeit her priestly rights, but a kōhēn does not forfeit his priestly rights; a kōhenet may become defiled because of the dead, but a kōhēn must not contract defilement because of the dead; a kōhēn may eat of the most holy sacrifices, but a kōhenet may not eat of the most holy sacrifices.

This text²⁷ is specifically concerned with pointing out that the priestliness of a kōhenet implies less than the priestliness of a kōhēn. Thus, the commandment to burn the meal-offering of a priest (Lev 6:16, "Every meal-offering of a priest must be a whole-offering; it is not to be eaten.") is taken to refer to the son of a priest, but not to the daughter of a priest. The kōhenet who marries a non-priestly Israelite is to eat the meal-offering as if she had not been born into the priestly class. In contrast, the non-priestly Israelite woman who is married to a priest is considered to be of priestly class, and her meal-offering is burned.

Similarly, a daughter of a priest may lose her right to eat the heave-offering (tērūmā) by having sexual intercourse with a man forbidden to her. Such a sexual connection also implies that

she may never marry a priest. The son of a priest, however, who marries a woman forbidden to him, such as a prostitute or a divorced woman (see Lev 21:7), loses his priestly rights only for the period during which he is married to her. If he divorces her or if she dies, he may once again claim his priestly rights. Thus, while a daughter of a priest can "profane herself" permanently, a son of a priest cannot. The Babylonian Talmud (Soṭa 23b) gives Lev 21:15 ("that he may not profane his seed among his people") as scriptural proof for the permanency of a male priest's priestliness: a priest can profane his seed but not himself, i.e., the children of such a union are not of the priestly class, but he himself remains a priest (cf. b. Mak. 2a; m. Bek. 7:7).

Further, a kōhenet, unlike a kōhēn, is allowed to touch a corpse. The Babylonian Talmud (Soṭa 23b) gives Lev 21:1 as scriptural proof for this distinction between kōhēn and kōhenet: "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron (. . . that none of them shall defile himself for the dead among his people)," is taken to mean "the sons of Aaron" and not "the daughters of Aaron."

Finally, a kōhēn may eat of the most holy sacrifices, while a kōhenet is not allowed to do so. The scriptural proof adduced by the Babylonian Talmud (Soṭa 23b) is Lev 6:11: "All male descendants of Aaron may eat (. . . of the offerings made by fire . . .)."

M. Soṭa 3:7 makes clear that at least one rabbinic view was that the priestliness of a woman was much more fragile and open to profanation than that of a man. There was no circumstance under which a man could lose his priestliness; the priestliness of a woman, however, could be forfeited forever by one act of sexual intercourse, whether desired or forced. Further, according to this view, the priestliness of a woman did not imply the same degree of sanctity as the man's priestliness. Thus, the prohibition of touching a corpse and the right to eat of the most holy sacrifices did not apply to the kōhenet. Nevertheless, there is a recognition that the kōhenet, be she a priest's daughter or a priest's wife, has the right to eat of the heave-offering.²⁸ Her eating of the heave-offering is surrounded by purity regulations, such as that she not eat of it during her menstrual period (m. Nid. 1:7).

In light of this background, one is rather surprised to read the following passage (b. Hul. 131b-132a):

עולא הוה יהיב מתנחא לכהנתא. איתיביה רבה
 "לעולא, "מנחת כהנה נאכלת, מנחת כהן אינה נאכלת,
 ואי אמרת כהן ואפילו כהנה, והכתיב, "וכל מנחת
 כהן כליל תהיה לא תאכל". אמר ליה, רבי
 מטונך; אהרוך ובניו כתוביו בפרשה. דבי רבי
 ישמעאל תנא, "כהן" ולא כהנה, וילמוד סתום
 מן המפורש. דבי ר' אליעזר בן יעקב תנא,
 "כהן", ואפילו כהנה, הוי מיעוט אחר מיעוט
 ואין מיעוט אחר מיעוט אלא לרבות. רב כהנא
 אכל בשביל אשתו; רב פפא אכל בשביל אשתו;
 רב יימר אכל בשביל אשתו; רב אידי בר אבין
 אכל בשביל אשתו. אמר רבינא, אמר לי מרימר...
 והלכתא כוונה דעולא.

'Ulla used to give the priestly dues to the *kōhenet*. Rava raised the following objection to 'Ulla. We have learned: "The meal-offering of a *kōhenet* is eaten, and the meal-offering of a *kōhen* is not eaten" (*m. Soṭa* 3:7). Now if you say that *kōhen* includes a *kōhenet* too, is it not written, "And every meal-offering of a priest must be a whole-offering; it is not to be eaten" (Lev 6:16)? He replied, "Master, I borrow your own argument, for in that passage are expressly mentioned Aaron and his sons."

The School of R. Ishmael taught: "Unto the *kōhen*" (Deut 18:3), but not unto the *kōhenet*, for we may infer what is not explicitly stated from what is explicitly stated.

The School of R. Eli'ezer ben Jacob taught: "Unto the *kōhen*" (Deut 18:3), and even unto the *kōhenet*, for we have here a limitation following a limitation, and the purpose of a double limitation is to extend the law.

R. Kahana used to eat (the priestly dues) on account of his wife. R. Papa used to eat them on account of his wife. R. Yemar used to eat them on account of his wife. R. Idi bar Avin used to eat them on account of his wife.

Ravina said, Meremar told me . . . that the halakha is in accordance with 'Ulla's view.²⁹

The issue here is whether the *kōhenet* (priest's daughter) who has married a non-priest is allowed to eat the priestly dues (Deut 18:3-4). According to the passages discussed thus far, the answer seems to be a clear no. A priestly woman who has married a non-priestly man forfeits her priestly rights. Yet this text reports on a tradition according to which priests' daughters who had "profaned themselves" (cf. *m. Soṭa* 3:7) were in fact allowed to continue to eat the priestly dues. Even more surprising is the tradition that a number of non-priestly rabbis³⁰ ate the priestly dues on account of their priestly wives, which means that not only did these women not forfeit their priestly rights upon marriage to a non-priest, but that they were even able to pass these rights on to their husbands. Two scriptural arguments are made for giving priests' daughters the priestly dues even

if they are married to sons of non-priests. The arguments are both based on Deut 18:3, which reads:

וְזֶה יִהְיֶה מִשְׁפַּט הַכֹּהֲנִים
מֵאֵם הָעֵם מֵאֵם זֶבַחִי הַזֶּבֶחַ אִם־שׂוֹר אִם־שֶׂה
וְנָתַן לְכֹהֵן הַזֶּרַע וְהַלְחִיִּים וְהַקִּבָּה:

And this shall be the priests' due from the people, from those offering sacrifice, whether it be ox or sheep: they shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach.

The arguments are:

1. Deut 18:3 speaks of "priests" (m.) and "priest" (m.) as the recipients of the priestly dues; according to 'Ulla, these terms, in contrast to the "Aaron and his sons" of Lev 6:16, which refer to the meal-offering and is the scriptural basis for burning the meal-offering of kōhānīm (m.) and letting kōhānōt (f.) eat their meal-offering (m. Sota 3:7), can include women.
2. According to the School of R. Ishmael, the grammatical gender of "priest" in Deut 18:3 implies the exclusion of women.
3. According to the School of R. Eli'ezer ben Jacob, the use of both "priests" (m.) and "priest" (m.) in Deut 18:3, both of which exclude women, has the effect that the double exclusion implies an inclusion.

These two strands of tradition, i.e., that the priestliness of a kōhenet is lasting and that it is not, must be left to stand side by side. There is no reason to try to harmonize the two.

It is not possible to discuss all of the passages in which kōhenet appears, but even the few passages cited show that:

1. The rabbis recognized that a kōhenet had certain rights and duties;
2. There were divergent views as to how derivative and fragile a woman's priestliness was, so that whether she could lose her priestly rights is not univocally answered.³¹

There would be no difficulty in identifying hierieia/hierissa as the Greek equivalent of kōhenet. Such an identification would in no way imply congregational leadership or a cultic function, other than the right to eat the priestly offerings (and possibly the right to pass this right on to their husbands). It would also imply the respect due to a member of the priestly caste.

2. Hierieia/hierissa in the Inscriptions Means "Priest" in the Cultic Sense of the Term

Some may find this hard to believe. Female cultic functionaries do not fit our image of ancient Judaism. To be

sure, seventy-five and eighty years ago there were those who argued that women could have held some official position in the ancient Israelite cult,³² but their view gradually fell out of scholarly favor.³³ This is not the place for a thorough, critical examination of the question of female priests in ancient Israel, but it is necessary to survey briefly some of the evidence cited by scholars at the turn of the century, as well as by several contemporary scholars who have argued that women may at one time have served as priestesses in ancient Israel. The relevance of the early material for the later should be clear. Earlier practices could have lived on for centuries, and biblical priestesses could have functioned as a model for the post-biblical period.

Two biblical texts which have been cited as evidence for priestesses in ancient Israel are Exod 38:8 and 1 Sam 2:22. Exod 38:8 reads:

ויעש את הכיור נחשת ראה כנר נחשת
במראה הצבאח אשר צבאו פתח אהל מועד:

And he (Bezalel) made the laver of bronze and its base of bronze, from the mirrors of the ministering women (hassob'ot) who ministered (sab'u) at the door of the tent of meeting.

The root sb, in addition to the more usual meaning of "to wage war," can also mean "to serve in the cult," as it does in Num 4:3,23,30; 8:24, where it refers to the cultic service of Levites.

1 Sam 2:22 reads:

ועלי זקן מאד ושמע את כל אשר יעשו
בניו לכל-ישראל ראה אשר-ישכבין
אח-הנשים הצבאח פתח אהל מועד:

Now Eli was very old, and he heard all that his sons were doing in Israel, and how they lay with the women who ministered (hassob'ot) at the door of the house of meeting.³⁴

Whether this text refers to ritual, polyandrous sexual activity, normally called "cultic prostitution" by modern scholars, is unclear. If so, then we must assume that ritual sexual activity at a YHWH cultic site (Shiloh) was at least tolerated. An alternative explanation is that the sexual intercourse between the sons of Eli and the women ministering at the tent was not ritual in any way, and that the cultic service of these women consisted of some other sort of activity.

As might be expected, a number of modern scholars have suggested that the "women who ministered at the door of the tent

of meeting" in Exod 38:8 and 1 Sam 2:22 were actually house-keepers. S. R. Driver speaks of "the performance of menial duties by the women."³⁵ A. Eberharter speculates that the women may have been the wives and daughters of the priests, who would seem to have a special calling "to perform those tasks at the temple which required feminine diligence and sense of aesthetics."³⁶ Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg writes: "The women mentioned here (and in Exod 38:8) have the responsibility for seeing to it that the entrance, which is especially important for what goes on at the sanctuary, is kept clean."³⁷

These two texts, both of which refer to the pre-Jerusalem temple period, must be treated very cautiously. Rather than calling them evidence, I would prefer simply to say that they raise questions. The problem of over-interpretation actually lies not in suggesting that these women may have been cultic functionaries, but rather in knowing that they must have performed those menial duties which the modern commentators assign to their wives, daughters and housemaids.

It has been suggested that several biblical figures were possibly priestesses. Zipporah, for example, daughter of a Midianite priest and wife of Moses (Exod 2:16, 21), performed the ritual of circumcision on her son in order to avert the destructiveness of the Lord (Exod 4:24-26). F. M. Cross suggests that she was "apparently a priestess in her own right."³⁸ One must note, however, that circumcising is not usually considered to be a priestly activity, although it may have been in that period.

Benjamin Mazar suggests that Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, in whose tent Sisera sought refuge (Judg 4:17-20), could have functioned as a priestess at the sacred precincts related to the terebinth of Elon-bezaannaim:

It may be concluded that Sisera fled from the battle to the tent of Jael not only to seek the peace which reigned between Jabin the king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite, but also because of the special exalted position of Jael, and because her dwelling place, Elon Bezaannaim, was recognized as a sanctified spot and a place of refuge where protection was given even to an enemy. As for Sisera's murder at a sanctified spot, in violation of all rules of hospitality, it may be explained only as the fulfillment of a divine command by a charismatic woman; thus: "Blessed above women shall the wife of Heber be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent" (Judg 5:24).³⁹

Mazar's conclusion is based on the background of the family of Heber the Kenite, on the religious significance of terebinths,⁴⁰ as well as on the verse in the Song of Deborah, "In the days of

Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, caravans ceased and travelers kept to the byways" (Judg 5:6). This parallelization of Shamgar and Jael led the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi to note, "'In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael' indicates that even Jael was a judge in Israel in her days" (מלמד שאף יעל שפטה את ישראל בימיה).⁴¹

Judg 5:24 reads, "Blessed above women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of the women in the tent most blessed" (תברך: מנשים יעל אשה חבר הקני מנשים באהל תברך:). It is worth noting that Targum Jonathan translates this verse as follows:

והתברך מברכה נשיא מבתא יעל אחח חבר
 42: שלמאה כחדא מנשיא דמשמשן בבתי מדרשין שפתי תברך:

Let the blessed one of goodly women, Jael the wife of Heber, be blessed; her perfection is as one of the women who minister in the houses of learning. Blessed is she!

The root *šmš* means "to minister," "to officiate," "to wait upon." In Hebrew it is used of the high priest and the common priests in reference to their Yom Kippur functions in the temple (e.g., *m. Yoma* 7:5; *y. Yoma* 44b.40-42), to the high priest's exercising the office of high priest (e.g., *b. Yoma* 47a), to the functions of the segan, i.e., the adjutant high priest (e.g., *y. Yoma* 41a.3-4), and to other administrative functions (e.g., *y. Soṭa* 24a.24-25). In the targums, *šmš* is also used to mean priestly activity. For example, for 1 Sam 1:3, "the two sons of Eli, Hophni, and Phineas, were priests of the Lord" (שני בני עלי חפני), Targum Jonathan reads, "the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas, ministered before the Lord" (תרין בני עלי רי).⁴³ Seen against the background of the use of *šmš* to refer to priestly activity, the "women who minister (*dimšamšin*) in the houses of learning" of Targum Jonathan gains added interest, whereby the "houses of learning" remains an enigma. Doubtlessly some scholars will want to see the ministry of these women as consisting of sweeping the floor and rearranging the mats after the pupils and their learned teachers had finished the day's lesson, but such an interpretation would seem to be biased by a particular view of women. Could they have been teachers in the houses of learning?

In summary, Jael's family background, the fact that she is mentioned together with Shamgar (Judg 5:6) and the fact that Sisera sought refuge in her tent (Judg 4:17-21; 5:25-27) point to the possibility that Jael was a charismatic and perhaps even a priestly figure. Targum Jonathan's use of *šmš* could indicate

that even in later periods the remembrance of Jael as a priestly figure was still alive, although what ministering in the houses of learning could have meant is unclear.

The figure of Miriam should also be mentioned here. Miriam, who is called a "prophet" (*nēbi'ā*), is said to have led the Israelite women in religious dancing and singing (Exod 15:20-21). Num 12 reports on a struggle for spiritual influence and authority which pitted herself and Aaron against Moses. The prophet Micah also seems to view Miriam as a prophet: "I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam" (Mic 6:4). These and further biblical references to Miriam (Num 20:1; 26:59; Deut 24:9; 1 Chr 5:29) are in need of a systematic study in order to ascertain what the exact nature of Miriam's cultic role may have been, whereby cultic does not necessarily imply priestly. Further, one must answer the difficult questions of dating, and thereby of original historical context (and of historicity), of the Miriam texts, before it is possible to describe adequately the development of the Miriam tradition.⁴⁴

One later chapter of the Miriam tradition deserves at least brief mention. Philo of Alexandria reports on a group of women called the Therapeutrides (*De vita contempl.* 2), who devoted their lives to the study of scripture (*De vita contempl.* 28). These celibate women (*De vita contempl.* 68) lived in a type of dual monastery together with their male colleagues, the Therapeutai. Philo emphasizes that they flourished in his time (20 B.C.E.--after 40 C.E.) in many countries, including non-Greek ones (also in Palestine?), but that they were especially numerous in the area of Alexandria (*De vita contempl.* 21). According to Philo, the Therapeutrides and Therapeutai closed their sabbath meal by singing together (*De vita contempl.* 87-88):

Τούτο δὲ ἰδόντες καὶ παθόντες, ὁ λόγου καὶ ἐννοίας καὶ ἐλπίδος μεῖζον ἔργον ἦν, ἐνθουσιωδῶντες τε ἄνδρες ὁμοῦ καὶ γυναῖκες, εἰς γενόμενοι χορὸς, τοὺς εὐχαριστηρίους ὕμνους εἰς τὸν σωτήρα θεὸν ᾄδον, ἐξάρχοντος τοῦ μὲν ἀνδράσι Μωυσεως τοῦ προφήτου, ταῖς δὲ γυναίξει Μαριαμ τῆς προφήτιδος. Τούτῳ μάλιστα ἀπεικονισθεῖς ὁ τῶν θεραπευτῶν καὶ θεραπευτρίδων, μέλεσιν ἀντήχοις καὶ ἀντιφώνοις πρὸς βαρὺν ἦχον τῶν ἀνδρῶν ὁ γυναικῶν ὄξυς ἀνακρινάμενος, ἑναρμόνιον συμφωνίαν ἀποτελεῖ καὶ μουσικὴν ὄντως.

This wonderful sight and experience (cf. Exod 14:26-29--the crossing of the Red Sea), an act transcending word and thought and hope, so filled with ecstasy both men and women that forming a single choir they sang hymns of thanksgiving to God their saviour, the men led by the prophet Moses and the women by the prophet Miriam. It is on this model above all that the choir of Therapeutai and Therapeutrides, note in

response to note and voice to voice, the treble of the women blending with the bass of the men, create an harmonious concert, music in the truest sense.

Thus, the ceremonial singing of the Therapeutrides and Therapeutai took as its model the singing of the Song of the Sea in Exod 15, in which the women were led by their prophet, Miriam, and the men by their prophet, Moses. From this text it is clear that the Miriam tradition played a role in the cultic life of the community.⁴⁵

This very cursory survey of evidence for women in ancient Israel having performed religious functions that may have been priestly cannot replace the intensive philological and historical work required to answer the question whether there were in fact women priests in ancient Israel. The passages cited show, however, that the question is not as absurd as it seems at first sight. In spite of the overwhelmingly masculine nature of the ancient Israelite priesthood, there are scraps of scattered evidence which could indicate a more varied historical reality than we are accustomed to imagine. The Israelite priesthood, like other institutions in ancient Israel and in the Jewish Diaspora, was not monolithic. The above texts, as well as the three inscriptions in question, are themselves hints of a diversity in the institution of the priesthood.

In the narrow sense of priesthood, i.e., fulfilling cultic functions at a sacred site, Marin from Leontopolis in the Heliopolitan nome is the only one of the three women named in the inscriptions who could have been a temple functionary, for she is the only one to have lived in a city and in a time in which a Jewish temple existed. Cultic or priestly functions could have included singing psalms, providing musical accompaniment, performing priestly blessings, examining the priestly offerings and animals and performing sacrifices. While it may seem strange to some that a temple founded by the Jerusalem high priestly family, the Oniads, could ever have allowed the cultic service of women, we must remind ourselves how little we actually know of the temple of Onias, which did, after all, endure for nearly two and a half centuries. Could it be that practices such as allowing women to exercise cultic functions were among the reasons for the rabbis' hesitancy to recognize the sacrifices offered there as valid? Could it be that the Jews of Leontopolis, living in a country in which there were female priests,⁴⁶ had come, over the course of time, to accept as natural the cultic participation of Jewish women who claimed to be descendants of Aaron (or the

successors to Miriam?)? Our knowledge of the Jewish temple at Leontopolis is too meager to be able to give a definitive answer to these questions.

In addition to the temple of Onias, Josephus mentions other Jewish temples in Egypt. He quotes Onias IV as writing in a letter to Ptolemy VI Philometor and Cleopatra II (*Ant.* 13.3.1 § 66):

... καὶ πλείστους εὐρῶν παρὰ τὸ καθήκον ἔχοντας ἱερά
καὶ διὰ τοῦτο δύσοντας ἀλλήλοις, ὃ καὶ Αἰγυπτίους
συμβέβηκε διὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ἱερῶν καὶ τὸ περὶ τὰς
θρησκείας οὐχ ὁμοδοξεῖν ...

. . . and I found that most of them have temples, contrary to what is proper, and that for this reason they are ill-disposed toward one another, as is also the case with the Egyptians because of the multitude of their temples and their varying opinions about the forms of worship . . .

Agatharchides of Cnidus (2nd C. B.C.E.) also speaks of Jewish temples in the plural (*hiera*),⁴⁷ as do Tacitus (1st C. C.E.; -- *templa*)⁴⁸ and Tertullian (2nd - 3rd C. C.E.; *templa*).⁴⁹ Whether *hiera/templa* in Agatharchides, Tacitus and Tertullian (and Josephus) means "temples" in the narrower sense of the term or simply "places of worship" is not absolutely certain.⁵⁰ Perhaps these terms were simply the equivalent of *proseuchai*, which was the usual term for synagogue in Egypt and also occurred elsewhere.⁵¹ On the other hand, the resistance to the possibility that *hiera/templa* meant "temples" in one or more of these texts probably has its origin in the belief that the existence of the Jerusalem temple excluded the possibility of other genuinely Jewish temples, that is, that the centralization of the cult was absolutely effective, a view which has little basis in the evidence.⁵²

Perhaps Marin served in one of these other Jewish *hiera* which Onias considered to be heterodox. Or perhaps she served in Onias's temple itself. According to the Josephus passage, the Jewish communities who supported these temples disagreed with each other concerning the proper form of worship. Could the temple service of women have been one of the points of the dispute, much as today Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Orthodox Jews are in disagreement as to whether women should be called up to read the Torah or should be ordained rabbis?

We cannot know precisely how Marin and her relatives and community understood the title *hierisa*. The existence of the Marin inscription should at least serve as a warning to any

scholar who would categorically deny that a woman may have functioned as a priest in a Jewish temple in Leontopolis. The mention in several ancient authors of Jewish "temples" should remind us just how little we know about Jewish worship in this period.

3. Hiereia/hierissa could denote a synagogue function

To some, synagogue function may seem as incredible an interpretation as cultic function. Is it not the case that the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. and the closing of the Jewish temple in Leontopolis in or shortly before 73 C.E. saw the end of priestly cultic service? Ancient sources show that the situation is not that simple. We know that priests continued to give the priestly blessing even after the destruction of the temple. (This practice has continued until our own day.)⁵³ The priestly blessing in the synagogue is a continuation of the priests' blessing of the people in the temple, a practice which is based on Num 6:22-27. Whether the priestly blessing in the synagogue was practiced already during the time of the Second Temple is not clear. There is evidence that the practice of having a priest be the first to read from the Torah during the synagogue service is an ancient one. M. Git. 5:8 reads:

ואלו דברים אמרו מפני דרכי שלום.
כהן קורא ראשון, ואחריו לוי,
ואחריו ישראל, מפני דרכי שלום.

These are the things which they ordained because of peace: a priest is the first to read (from the Torah) and after him a Levite, and after him a common Israelite, for the sake of peace.

Philo of Alexandria also attests to the priests being preferred as readers (Hypothetica 7.13):

Καὶ ὄητα συνέρχονται μὲν αἰεὶ καὶ συνεδρεῦουσι μετ' ἀλλήλων· οἱ μὲν πολλοὶ σιωπῇ, πλὴν εἴ τι προσεπευφημησάτωις ἀναγινωσκομένοις νομίζεται· τῶν ἱερέων δὲ τις ὁ παρῶν ἢ τῶν γερόντων εἰς ἀναγινώσκει τοὺς ἱεροῦς νόμους αὐτοῦς καὶ καθ' ἕκαστον ἐξηγεῖται μέχρι σχεδὸν δείλης ὀψίας· καὶ τοῦδε ἀπολύονται τῶν τε νόμων τῶν ἱερῶν ἐμπείρωσ ἔχοντες καὶ πολὺ ὁμῶς πρὸς εὐσέβειαν ἐπιδεδωκότες.

And indeed they do always assemble and sit together, most of them in silence except when it is the practice to add something to signify approval of what is read. But some priest who is present or one of the elders reads the holy

laws to them and expounds them point by point till about the late afternoon, when they depart having gained both expert knowledge of the holy laws and considerable advance in piety.

According to this description of a sabbath service at the time of Philo, which is presumably a reflection of Alexandrian practice, a priest or elder reads a scriptural passage and then delivers a sermon on it. In this passage, Philo is referring to general Jewish practice and not to one of the Jewish sects. The practice presupposed here is different from the rabbinic ideal expressed in m. Git. 5:8. According to Philo, one person reads the entire passage, whereas m. Git. 5:8 ordains that more than one person should read. Philo does not state that the priest has preference over the elder, but the priest is mentioned first. Perhaps a priest, if present, was given preference, and otherwise one of the elders read and preached.

In addition to the ancient evidence for these two priestly practices in the synagogue, i.e., the priestly blessing and the preference for priestly readers, the Theodosian Code contains a rather surprising reference to priests as synagogue functionaries. The word "priest" (in the plural: hiereis, used as a foreign word in the Latin text) occurs only once in reference to Jews in the Theodosian Code (16.8.4, given on December 1, 331):

Idem A. hiereis et archisynagogis et patribus synagogarum et ceteris, qui in eodem loco deserviunt. Hiereos et archisynagogos et patres synagogarum et ceteros, qui synagogis deserviunt, ab omni corporali munere liberos esse praecipimus.⁵⁴

The same Augustus to the priests, heads of the synagogues, fathers of the synagogues, and all those who serve in the said place. We command that priests, heads of the synagogues, fathers of the synagogues, and all others who serve the synagogues shall be free from every compulsory service of a corporal nature.⁵⁵

This law has been discussed above in the context of mothers/fathers of the synagogues⁵⁶ and of heads of the synagogue.⁵⁷

Important for the present context is the inclusion of hiereis among others who serve in the synagogue, including heads of the synagogues and fathers of the synagogue. There are two possible explanations for the Roman lawgiver's having included hiereis in this law:

1. Christians, in writing the law, used the general Christian and pagan term for official religious functionary, not realizing that Jewish priests were not synagogue functionaries.

2. The authors of the law were well-informed of the inner workings of the synagogue, and this law is therefore an attestation of the Jewish priest's having been a synagogue functionary in this period.

In support of the first possibility, the increasing use of hierews for Christian office-holders should be mentioned. In a period in which Christians had come to use the specifically cultic title hierews to refer to deacons, presbyters and bishops,⁵⁸ hierews could have taken on the general meaning of "religious functionary." Thus, hierews may reflect Christian, and not Jewish, usage. A modern parallel would be the use of "Islamic priest" to describe a mullah, which reflects the religious background of Western journalists, rather than Islamic usage. The position of hierews, i.e., first in the list, could support this interpretation: the authors first employ the term which they consider to be the general term for "religious functionary," and then proceed to the specific titles of synagogue office known to them.

In support of the second explanation, one must note that the Christian authors had a deep enough knowledge of synagogue organization to employ two terms not in use in the Christian church: archisynagogi and patres synagogarum, although archisynagogos would have been known to them from the New Testament.⁵⁹ Further, the imperial court writers would certainly not have had an interest in liberating more persons than necessary from the corporal duties. Their interest would rather have been to limit the liberation to those persons who were clearly synagogue functionaries.

It is difficult to decide which is the better explanation, particularly in the light of the fact that the term hierews, as applied to Jews, occurs only once in the Theodosian Code. Although the second explanation is probably more convincing, it seems more prudent simply to let the two explanations both stand as good possibilities.

Evidence for special recognition of priests in non-temple worship services can be found at Qumran, where priests, together with the elders or the Levites and the elders, are commanded to sit in front (1 QS 6:8; 1QM 13:1). One must note, however, that the people of Qumran probably viewed their worship service as a substitute temple service, while it is not clear that synagogue congregants did. Further, according to the Manual of Discipline, there are to be three priests in the Council of the Community (1 QS 8:1). The Damascus Document ordains that of the ten judges

of the community, four must be from the tribe of Levi and Aaron (CD 10:4-5).⁶⁰

This scattered evidence for priests having roles in the synagogue or worship service as synagogue functionaries should not be misunderstood as evidence for priests as synagogue functionaries, but Philo, from the period before the destruction of the temple; the rabbinic references to the priestly blessing and the first Torah reader's being a priest, which can be dated back to at least the redaction of the Mishnah in the early third century; and the fourth-century Theodosian Code reference to Jewish priests in the context of synagogue officials (which may not be reliable, however) do show that several streams within Judaism seem to have given priests certain rights and roles within the non-temple worship service.⁶¹

Does any of this mean that Jewish women of priestly caste had special roles in the worship service? This is by no means immediately obvious. Our starting point was the three hierieia/hierissa inscriptions. If male priests could, by virtue of their priesthood, exercise certain roles in the non-temple worship service, is it possible that female priests could likewise have performed certain functions in the worship service? There are certain hindrances to an acceptance of this proposition. For example, the male, i.e., exclusive, language of Num 6:23 ("Say to Aaron and his sons"; דַבֵּר אֶל־אֶהֱרֹךְ וְאֶל־בְּנָיו; LXX: Ἀδελφῶν Ααρων καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς αὐτοῦ), was probably understood by all later exegetes to mean that men--but not women--of priestly caste are to recite the priestly blessing. The rabbis usually take exclusive biblical language to mean that women are in fact excluded.⁶² This tradition of interpretation should be taken much more seriously by those of today who argue that "sons" really includes "daughters" and "man" really includes "woman." Against the background of the exclusion of women where the bible uses male terminology, it is surprising to find a rabbinic example of the exact opposite: taking the biblical "son" (bēn) in Deut 25:5 to mean "son or daughter." The context is the woman whose husband dies without a son and whose brother-in-law is therefore required to marry her in order "that his (i.e., the dead husband's) name not be blotted out of Israel" (Deut 25:6). The rabbis ruled that if the deceased husband had a daughter, then the brother-in-law was not required to marry the woman (b. B. Bat. 109a). Perhaps this inclusive tradition is an old one, for the LXX has sperma for bēn, and to paidion for habbēkōr (Deut 25:5-6). In sum, it is likely that most streams of Judaism

would have taken Num 6:23 ("sons of Aaron") to mean that only male priests should recite the priestly blessing, but the extension of "sons" to include "daughters" would not be a total anomaly in the history of Jewish exegesis.

Is it possible that priestly women could have been preferred readers of the Torah? Again, to most scholars of Judaism, this proposition sounds absurd, largely because of the general view that women were not allowed to read the Torah in the ancient synagogue at all. Can ancient sources shed any light on this question? An important passage is t. Meg. 4.11 (Zuck. 226):

והכל עולין למנין שבעה, אפילו אשה, אפילו קטן.
אין מביאין אה האשה לקרוח לרבים.⁶³

Everyone can be counted in the minyan of the seven (who read the Torah in the worship service), even a woman, even a minor, but one does not bring a woman up to read to the congregation.

The Babylonian Talmud (Meg. 23a) has:

חנאו רבנן הכל עולין למנין שבעה,
ראפילו קטן, ראפילו אשה, אבל אמרו חכמים,
אשה לא תקרא בחורה מפני כבוד צבור.

Our rabbis taught: Everyone can be counted in the minyan of the seven, even a minor, even a woman; but the sages said: A woman does not read from the Torah due to the honor of the congregation.

It is clear that these texts forbid women from reading the Torah to the congregation. The enigma is that if they are clearly forbidden to read, why are women included in the quorum of the seven in the first place? Minors, who are also included, are in fact allowed to read (see m. Meg. 4:6), a practice which later receded with the rise of the bar-mitzvah. Why are women included here at all? Ismar Elbogen suggests that women were originally allowed to read, but that by the Tannaitic period, they were already excluded.⁶⁴ This would mean that the rabbinic inclusion of women in the quorum of the seven attests to a more ancient tradition, later suppressed, according to which women were allowed to read from the Torah in public.

Why the Babylonian Talmud gives the "honor of the congregation" as a reason for not allowing women to read is unclear. A possible parallel case could be a woman, a slave or a minor reading the Egyptian Hallel (Pss 113-118) to a man who is not able to read or to recite it from memory himself. The Mishnah ordains that such a man should repeat it after the woman,

the slave or the minor reading it, but curses be upon him (m. Sukk. 3:10)! The shame of having a member of one of these groups read to an illiterate, Jewish, adult male was apparently great in the eyes of the rabbis.⁶⁵ What m. Sukk. 3:10 does show is that it was not unknown in the rabbinic period for women to be capable of reading scripture aloud.

Neither t. Meg. 4.11 nor m. Sukk. 3:10 can be dated more specifically than to the Tannaitic period, which closed around the first quarter of the third century. They are not parallel passages, of course, for t. Meg. refers to women reading the Torah in public and forbids it, while m. Sukk. 3:10 refers to women reading the Hallel in private and grudgingly allows it. The enigma of the inclusion of women in the minyan of the seven cannot be definitively solved with the few hints available to us in our sources, but their inclusion does make it impossible to state that under no circumstances did women publicly read from the Torah in the ancient synagogue. We must simply admit that we do not know if women did or did not read.⁶⁶ If we do not know what the situation in Palestine and Babylonia was, how much less do we know of synagogue worship in Egypt or in Rome, where Marin and Gaudentia worshiped.

In conclusion, although the recitation by priestly women of the priestly blessing seems unlikely in light of the explicit "Aaron and his sons" in Num 6:22, it is not impossible that certain communities could have interpreted this to mean "Aaron and his children" and have asked both the priestly women and the priestly men present to bless them. Further, although there is no solid evidence for women having read the Torah publicly in the synagogue service, it cannot be excluded, particularly for the Greek-speaking congregations (about which we know next to nothing), that they did. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that one or more of the three women of our inscriptions were remembered with the title "priest" because their priestly descent had entitled them to certain rights and honors in the synagogue service during their lifetime.

C. References to Male Priests in Inscriptions and Papyri

Before attempting to come to a decision as to the likelihood of the three possible interpretations of hiercia/hierissa, a brief survey of hiercus in Jewish inscriptions and papyri is necessary. From Rome there are four hiercus inscriptions, all

from the Monteverde catacomb, which Leon dates from the first century B.C.E., through the end of the third century C.E.⁶⁷

CII 346. Marble plaque.

Ἐνθάδε κίτε
2 Ἰουδας ἱερε-
ους.

L. 1: read κίται.
Ll. 2-3: read ἱερέυς.

Here lies Judas, priest.

CII 347. Marble plaque.

Ἐνθάδε
2 κίονται
Ἰουδας καὶ
4 Ἰωσηφ ἀρ-
χοντες
6 καὶ ἱερεῖς
καὶ ἀδελφοί.

Here lie Judas and Joses, archons and priests and brothers.

CII 355. Three marble fragments.

[Ἐνθ]άδε κίτε Ἰ[...]
2 [...]ος ἱερεύ[ς]
[....]καν ἐγ[....]
4 [....]την.⁶⁸

L. 1. read κίται.

Here lies J[....], priest [....].

CII 375. Marble plaque engraved on both sides; broken into six fragments.

Ἐνθάδε κίτε
2 Μαρία ἡ τοῦ ἱε-
ρέως.

L. 1. read κίται.

Here lies Maria the (wife? daughter?) of the priest.⁶⁹

It is striking that all of the Roman hierieia/hiereus inscriptions are from the Monteverde catacomb.⁷⁰ Unfortunately, no information about the actual role of the priest can be gleaned from these inscriptions. CII 375 is especially important for the question of whether hierieia/hierissa simply means "wife (or daughter) of a priest." The Maria here, who is the wife or daughter of a priest, is not called hierieia or hierissa, but

rather ἡ του ἱερεῶς. This does not mean that hierēia/hierissa in the three inscriptions in question could under no circumstances mean "wife (or daughter) of a priest," but it does show that there was a way in Greek to express such a relationship without this title, which a Greek speaker would have understood as meaning "female cultic functionary." Perhaps the "of the priest" is to distinguish her from another Maria in the community or perhaps it was meant to indicate that she was a non-Aaronide wife of a priest and therefore not a hierissa herself.

There are three occurrences of hierēus at Beth She'arim:

CII 1001 (Schwabe and Lifshitz, Beth She'arim 2. no. 49).

Ἱερεῶν.
.ד'י'ה'פ'ד

Of the priests. Priests.

Schwabe and Lifshitz, Beth She'arim 2. no. 180 (part one).

BA
Ἱερεὺς[ς]
[Ἱ]αβὶ Ἱερώων[υμος].

The priest, Rabbi Hieronymos.

Schwabe and Lifshitz, Beth She'arim 2. no. 181.

Ἰουδας
Ἱερεὺς.

Judas, priest.

In addition to these, there are two further inscriptions of relevance:

CII 1002 (Schwabe and Lifshitz, Beth She'arim 2.28),⁷¹

המקום הזה
של כהנים.

This place belongs to priests.

Schwabe and Lifshitz, Beth She'arim 2. no. 148.

Χωρὸν Βυρτιτιδος.

A priest from Beirut.

CII 1001 is carved on the ceiling above arcosolium 1 of Hall I in Catacomb 1. The "Of the priests. Priests," must mean that arcosolium 1 was set aside for the graves of priests. CII 1002

in Hall I of Catacomb 1 also indicates a separate burial place for priests; Schwabe and Lifshitz are of the opinion that māgôm here must mean "arcosolium," so that this inscription would be a further attestation of burying people of priestly descent separately. It is worthy of note that in none of the Greek inscriptions in arcosolium 1 of CII 1001 does the term "priest" occur (Schwabe and Lifshitz, Beth She'arim 2. nos. 50-53). Perhaps the single inscription CII 1001 was viewed as sufficient emphasis of the priestly ancestry of those buried in that arcosolium, making the use of hierous/hiereia on each individual epitaph unnecessary. This practice of the separate burial of priestly women and men indicates a strong concern for the priesthood even in the third and fourth centuries C.E.⁷²

Little can be said about the other inscriptions. In Schwabe and Lifshitz, Beth She'arim 2. no. 148, chōēn is the Greek transliteration of kōhēn.

At Leontopolis in Heliopolis, the site of CII 1514, the Marin inscription, no Jewish hierous inscriptions have been found. In fact, other than the Roman and Beth She'arim inscriptions, few Jewish inscriptions with hierous have been found at all to date.⁷³ In light of this rather striking distribution--a number of "priest" inscriptions from the Monteverde catacomb in Rome and from the necropolis at Beth She'arim and few elsewhere--it is reasonable to assume that priestly descent was especially emphasized in the communities which buried their dead on these two sites.⁷⁴ Whether this special emphasis on the priesthood also implies that priestly women and men in these communities had special roles cannot be said.

The term hierous also occurs several times in Egyptian Jewish papyri (CPJ 120, 121, 139 [twice]), but since each occurrence consists only of a name followed by "priest," they are of little help to us in identifying any priestly functions.

Conclusions

As unsatisfying as it may be, it must be admitted that it is impossible to know precisely what hieria/hierissa in the three ancient Jewish inscriptions means. Were this term to be the equivalent of the rabbinic kōhenet, no problems of orthodoxy would present themselves, for kōhenet does not signify a cultic or administrative religious functionary. If, on the other hand, it were to imply certain functions in the synagogue or temple worship service, the accepted image of ancient Jewish worship

would have to be altered considerably. In contrast to the synagogue functionaries discussed thus far, the Jewish priesthood has biblical roots and was attached to the temple service, both of which make the question of Jewish male and female priests highly complex.

For all of these difficulties, it must also be emphasized that if the three inscriptions had come from another Graeco-Roman religion, no scholar would have thought of arguing that "priest" does not really mean "priest." The composers of these inscriptions must have been aware that they were employing a term which normally implied a cultic function. Further, as the above survey has shown, it is not as far-fetched to imagine that a woman could have had a cultic function, for example, at the Jewish temple in Leontopolis, or that a woman could have had a synagogue function, such as reading from the Torah, as it might seem at first blush. Until further evidence is found to support one or the other of the interpretations, it seems most prudent to keep the various options open. In light of the evidence surveyed, an absolute statement such as that of Jean Juster, ". . . women were not allowed to be priestesses among the Jews,"⁷⁵ does not seem prudent.

PART TWO

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS