

## 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-  
ρηστή πα-  
4 σίφιλε κ-  
αί ἄλυπε κ-  
6 αὶ φιλογίτ-  
ων χαῖρε, ὥ-  
8 ς ἔτων ν'.  
L γ' Καίσαρ Π-  
10 αὔνι 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."<sup>1</sup> 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)a, "priestess" (Priesterin).<sup>2</sup> The name Marin is a form of Marion<sup>3</sup> and also occurs in other Greek inscriptions.<sup>4</sup>

This is one of eighty Jewish inscriptions found in a Jewish necropolis in Tell el-Yahudiyyeh.<sup>5</sup> 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 . . . ." <sup>6</sup>

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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> The very existence of these various cultic sites raises the question of pluralism within the Jewish cult.



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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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

#### Beth She'arim

CII 1007.<sup>14</sup> 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]ίης  
[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.<sup>15</sup> Schwabe and Lifshitz argue that Sara's corpse had been brought from abroad, perhaps from Palmyra, for burial in Beth She'arim.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> The name of Sara's father, Naimia, is the equivalent of the Hebrew Nehemyah.<sup>18</sup> Note that Sara's father is not called a priest.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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?]  
Μαρῆ [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: