

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 זִבְחֵי הַזֶּבֶחַ אִם-שׂוֹר אִם-שֶׁה  
וְנָתַן לָכֶן 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.<sup>31</sup>

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,<sup>32</sup> but their view gradually fell out of scholarly favor.<sup>33</sup> 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 אה כל-אשר יעשו  
בניו לכל-ישראל ראה אשר-ישכבון  
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.<sup>34</sup>

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."<sup>35</sup> 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."<sup>36</sup> 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."<sup>37</sup>

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."<sup>38</sup> 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-bezaananim:

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).<sup>39</sup>

Mazar's conclusion is based on the background of the family of Heber the Kenite, on the religious significance of terebinths,<sup>40</sup> 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).<sup>41</sup>

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 החרברך:

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" (חרין בני עלי ופנחס ממששין קדם ירי).<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup>

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, ἐνθουσιωντὲς 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.<sup>45</sup>

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,<sup>46</sup> 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*),<sup>47</sup> as do Tacitus (1st C. C.E.; -- *templa*)<sup>48</sup> and Tertullian (2nd - 3rd C. C.E.; *templa*).<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps these terms were simply the equivalent of *proseuchai*, which was the usual term for synagogue in Egypt and also occurred elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup>

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.)<sup>53</sup> 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 σιωπῆ, πλὴν εἴ τι προσεπευφημησάτωις ἀναγιγνωσκόμενοις νομίζεται· τῶν ἱερέων δὲ τις ὁ παρῶν ἢ τῶν γερόντων εἰς ἀναγινώσκει τοὺς ἱεροῦς νόμους αὐτοῦς καὶ καθ' ἕκαστον ἐξηγεῖται μέχρι σχεδὸν δειλίης ὀψίας· καὶ τοῦδε ἀπολύονται τῶν τε νόμων τῶν ἱερῶν ἐμπείρωσ ἔχοντες καὶ πολὺ ὀη πρός 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