

## CHAPTER VII

### FURTHER BACKGROUND ISSUES RELATING TO WOMEN

#### LEADERS IN THE ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE

##### A. Women's Participation in Synagogue Worship Services

The lack of an adequate understanding of women's participation in the life of the ancient synagogue has hindered research on the Jewish inscriptions in which women bear titles. Even the following, very cursory survey of several salient points should shed light on the context from which they arose. The basis for all other participation is attendance at the synagogue services. Women's attendance at synagogue worship services is taken for granted in the ancient sources.<sup>1</sup> The New Testament gives several of the earliest attestations of this. In Luke 13:10-17, Jesus heals a woman who had been bent over for eighteen years. According to the evangelist, the framework of the miracle is a sabbath service: "Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath" (Luke 13:10).

The Acts of the Apostles also attest to women's presence at worship services. When Paul and Silas traveled to Philippi, they followed their usual custom of searching out the local synagogue (Acts 16:12b-14):

Ἔμην δὲ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ πόλει διατρίβοντες ἡμέρας τινάς. τῇ τε ἡμέρᾳ τῶν σαββάτων ἐξήλθομεν ἔξω τῆς πύλης παρὰ ποταμὸν οὗ ἐνομιζομεν προσευχὴν εἶναι, καὶ καθίσαντες ἐλάλοῦμεν ταῖς συνελθούσαις γυναῖξιν. καὶ τις γυνὴ ὀνόματι Λυδία, πορφυροπώλις πόλεως θυατείρων σεβομένη τὸν θεόν, ἤκουεν, ἣς ὁ κύριος διήνοιξεν τὴν καρδίαν προσέχειν τοῖς λαλουμένοις ὑπὸ τοῦ Παύλου.

We remained in this city for some days; and on the sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a synagogue (proseuchē); and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul.

There is a general tendency among scholars to assume that it is not an actual synagogue service which is meant, but rather some sort of outdoor prayer meeting. The reasons for the hesitancy to translate proseuchē as "synagogue" are: 1) the "we supposed" (hou enomizomen) of v. 13; 2) the use of proseuchē instead of

synagōgē, which is the usual term in Acts (Acts 6:9; 9:2; etc.); and 3) the fact that the congregants are women.<sup>2</sup> As to the first reason, it does not seem unusual that the missionaries would not know the site of the synagogue in a strange town. Secondly, the term proseuchē perhaps goes back to the sources of the author of Acts (the same term occurs immediately following in 16:16) or is perhaps a simple variant in the author's usage. It is in any case well-attested as meaning "synagogue."<sup>3</sup> I believe that the real reason for the hesitancy is that the only congregants mentioned are women. One can see that this is a circular argument: on the assumption that women did not attend or only rarely attended synagogue services, a text which speaks of women attending services is taken as not referring to genuine synagogue worship. None of the three reasons is convincing, and this text is therefore a further attestation of women's presence at Jewish worship services. Another example is found in Acts 17:4, in which "not a few of the leading women" were persuaded by Paul's sermon in the synagogue of Thessalonica. Finally, Acts 18:26, "He [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately," is an example of a Jewish woman not only attending the service, but also teaching in a synagogue context.

Rabbinic sources also speak of women participating in synagogue services. B. 'Abod. Zar. 38a-38b reads:

אשה קדירה על גבי כירה ובאה עובדה כוכבים  
ומניסה עד שתבא מביית המרחץ או מביית הכנסת  
ואינה חוששת.

[An Israelite] woman may set a pot on a stove and let a gentile woman then come and stir it pending her return from the bathhouse or the synagogue, and she need take no notice of it.

This saying is a *baraita* (i.e., Tannaitic). Just preceding these words, the text speaks of a male Israelite leaving a gentile man to watch his meat while he is in the synagogue or house of learning. Thus it is assumed that just as men ordinarily go to synagogue, so too do women ordinarily go to synagogue. A further relevant text is y. Ber. 9d.6-8 (cf. b. Soṭa 38a):

עיר שכולה כהנים נושאים אה כפיהן. למי הן מברכין?  
לאחיהן שבצפון לאחיהם שבדרום לאחיהם שבמזרח  
לאחיהם שבמערב. ומי עונה אחריהן אמר? הנשים והטף.

In a town where all are priests they raise up their hands [to give the blessing]. Whom do they bless? Their brothers in the north, in the south, in the east and in the west. And who answers, "Amen," after them? The women and the children.

Again, the women's presence in the service is simply presupposed.<sup>4</sup> Note that this text presupposes that only male priests give the priestly blessing. A story told of a woman who used to go each week to hear R. Me'ir (ca. 150) preach would be one more example of the way in which also the rabbinic sources take women's attendance at worship services to be an ordinary phenomenon (y. Sotā 16d.38-52; Lev. Rab. 9.9; cf. Deut. Rab. 5.15). Another story about a woman's regular attendance at synagogue services is also relevant here (b. Sotā 22a):

דההיא אלמנה דהואי בי כנישחא בשיבכותה,  
 כל יומא הוא אחיא ומצלה בי מדרשיה דרבי יוחנן,  
 אמר לה, בחי! לא בית הכנסת בשיבכותך.  
 אמרה ליה, רבבי! ולא שכר פסיעות יש לי.

A certain widow had a synagogue in her neighborhood; yet she used to come daily to the school of R. Johanan and pray there. He said to her, "My daughter, is there not a synagogue in your neighborhood?" She answered him, "Rabbi, but have I not the reward for the steps!"

The issue here is not that the woman goes to the synagogue regularly, but rather that she walks quite a distance to attend services in a synagogue far from her home and merits reward for her extra steps. That she attends is not cause for surprise. The background of these sources is that, according to Tannaitic halakhah, women are obliged to pray (m. Ber. 3:3); prayer in the synagogue is one of the ways of fulfilling that obligation.

In the light of such sources, one can say with certainty that Jewish women attended synagogue services in the period of the Second Temple and of the Mishnah and the Talmud. It is difficult to understand how Goodenough could write with reference to the Juliana who had donated the mosaic in the synagogue at Naro in North Africa:

She herself could presumably not have attended the services in this sancta synagoga; but as with all daughters in Israel, her hope was in the maintenance of Jewish worship and life.<sup>5</sup>

#### B. Women as Donors to and of Synagogues

Anyone familiar with the workings of private institutions is acutely aware of the connection between the ability to give money and the capability of wielding influence. The boards of

trustees of the private institutions of this country provide ample attestation of this phenomenon. In the ancient world, philanthropy and power were also intimately connected with each other, perhaps even more so than today, whereby it is not always clear whether philanthropy was the prerequisite to holding office or vice versa. In an article entitled "Feminism in the Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum," S. L. Mohler writes:

It follows as a natural corollary to the importance of games and *epula* in the life of the ancient communities that social leadership was determined to a considerable extent by the ability of individuals to supply the demand for these forms of entertainment.<sup>6</sup>

After outlining the concrete relationship between certain official titles held by women and philanthropy, Mohler notes:

Having once received this formal recognition as public functionaries--which meant as much or as little as election to a magistracy--, these women were in a position to enter upon the prescribed career of philanthropy.<sup>7</sup>

Without simplistically transferring the situation of the non-Jewish world onto Judaism, it does seem reasonable to ask whether there might have been a relationship between donations to and of synagogues and influence in the Jewish community. This is not to ask whether synagogue functionaries attained their titles through engaging in donative activity or whether maintaining the synagogue building was one of their functions. Throughout the discussion of the various titles, we have seen that while persons who bear titles often appear in donative inscriptions, so too do those who bear none. The purpose of pointing out the women in Jewish donative inscriptions is not, therefore, to suggest that all of these held leadership positions or were synagogue functionaries. The point, rather, is to view the women title-bearers against the backdrop of women donors, that is, to consider the implications of the existence of women donors for the interpretation of the nineteen inscriptions in question.

For an overview of women donating alone and together with their husbands, as well as of others donating on behalf of women, see the forty-three inscriptions given in the appendix. The most important aspect of this corpus is not any one detail, but rather the very fact of the existence of such inscriptions. They belie the current, often unstated, view of Jewish women in antiquity as very much in the background, as not in any way involved in the public sphere, but rather as absolutely restricted to domestic

activities. They show that at least some women controlled their own property and possessed sufficient sums of money to be able to donate from it. One might ask whether the system of guardianship would not have been a severe restriction on women's control of their property, as the approval of the guardian (tutor, kyrios) was necessary before disposing of one's property. Guardians are not mentioned in the donative inscriptions, probably because donative inscriptions are not legal documents. If the guardian's approval was necessary, which, especially with the smaller donations, may not have been the case, all of these women succeeded in obtaining it. Since the system of guardianship had broken down considerably by the late Roman period,<sup>8</sup> the question may even be irrelevant for most of the inscriptions.

One synagogue where women were particularly active as donors was that in Apamea in Syria, which contained a mosaic floor with nineteen dedicatory inscriptions (Lifshitz, Donateurs nos. 38-56; Inscr. Syrie 1319-1337; CII 803-818). One of the inscriptions is dated to 391 (Lifshitz, Donateurs no. 38; CII 803<sup>9</sup>). Of the nineteen inscriptions, nine were ordered by women (Appendix nos. 7-15), and another five were ordered by a man (or men) and a woman (or women) together, in two cases with their children (Appendix nos. 30-34). Two further inscriptions contain donations on behalf of women (Appendix nos. 39-40). There are only three inscriptions (Lifshitz, Donateurs nos. 38, 47, 49; Inscr. Syrie 1319, 1328, 1330; CII 803, 812, 814) which mention only male donors (in contrast to nine which mention only women), although one of these (Lifshitz, Donateurs no. 38) refers not to one, but rather to several male donors. A caveat concerning the relationship between being a donor and holding an official position is in order here. In spite of the preponderance of women donors, the only office-holders mentioned by name are men.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the case of Apamea does not demonstrate that where women donate money, they receive official titles. It simply shows that they were active members of the synagogue and in control of a certain amount of money.

An inscription which shows a closer connection between donative activity and official honor is the Tation inscription from Phocaea, Ionia (Appendix no. 3; perhaps 3rd C.).<sup>11</sup> Tation donated an entire synagogue and was honored with a golden crown and prohedria, that is, the right to sit in front in the seat of honor. Perhaps this refers to the type of special chair or throne found in the synagogues at Delos, 'En-Gedi and Korazim.<sup>12</sup> One is reminded also of Jesus' indictment of the scribes and

Pharisees who "sit on the seat of Moses" and who "love the best seats (prōtokathedriai) in the synagogues" (Matt 23:2, 6). The prohedria granted to Tation does not fit in with the hypothesis of a women's gallery. One could imagine that this inscription is unambivalent with respect to the honor bestowed upon a woman. Not so to Salomon Reinach, who writes:

The inscription of Phocaea shows us that this distinction [i.e., prohedria] was accorded not only to the wealthy and the learned, but that the community conferred it, by special decision, even upon women.<sup>13</sup>

It would seem that a woman who donates an entire building is, by definition, wealthy, and how Mr. Reinach can know that Tation was not a learned person is unclear to this author.

Another woman who donated an entire synagogue was Julia Severa (Appendix no. 6; probably 1st C.), probably a non-Jewish woman<sup>14</sup> who was a high priestess, agōnothetis and eponymous magistrate (MAMA VI 153, 263, 265).<sup>15</sup> Her name continued to be associated with the synagogue for some time, for the extant inscription does not commemorate the erection of the building, but rather its repair at a later date.

The one woman title-bearer who was also a donor is Theopempte (Appendix no. 4), head of the synagogue. The contribution of her and her son Eusebios was a chancel screen post, possibly also the chancel screen attached to it.

In summary, the references to women in Jewish donative inscriptions do not prove that women were synagogue functionaries in antiquity, but they do show that some women controlled considerable sums of money and were active in supporting the synagogue. This is an important piece of information when considering the question of whether women could have been members of boards of elders or whether mothers of the synagogue might have served on governing boards. One of the functions of such boards might have been to make budgetary decisions. Those in society who are appointed or elected to make budgetary decisions are often those who possess property or money themselves. These inscriptions show that some women in antiquity controlled money and would, therefore, have been good candidates for board membership.

### C. Women as Proselytes to Judaism

Scholars have recognized for some time that women proselytes are mentioned relatively frequently in ancient sources.

Josephus, in speaking of the Jewish War, writes that the men of Damascus wanted to carry out a massacre against the Jews of Damascus, and that "their only fear was of their own wives, who, with few exceptions, had all become converts to the Jewish religion (πλὴν ὀλίγων ὑπηγμέναις τῇ Ἰουδαϊκῇ θρησκείᾳ), and so their efforts were mainly directed to keeping the secret from them" (J.W. 2.20.2 § 560). Because this report seems exaggerated to modern scholars, they often assume that these women, or at least the majority of them, had not become full Jews, but rather "God-fearers."<sup>16</sup> It is not at all clear why this should be the case. Josephus further reports that the Jewish merchant Ananias converted King Izates of Adiabene in the following way (Ant. 20.2.3. §§ 34-35):

...πρὸς τὰς γυναῖκας εἰσιὼν τοῦ βασιλέως ἐδίδασκεν αὐτάς τὸν θεὸν σέβειν, ὡς Ἰουδαίοις πατριὸν ἦν, καὶ δὴ δι' αὐτῶν εἰς γνῶσιν ἀφικόμενος τῷ Ἰζάτη κάμεινον ὁμοίως συνανέπεισεν...

. . . [Ananias] visited the king's wives and taught them to worship God after the manner of the Jewish tradition. It was through their agency that he was brought to the notice of Izates, whom he similarly won over with the co-operation of the women . . .

Izates' mother, Helena, independently of her son, also converted to Judaism. Helena was well-known for her help to the people of Jerusalem in a time of famine and was buried in Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup> The Mishnah (m. Yoma 3:10) mentions Helena's gifts to the Jerusalem temple, and the Babylonian Talmud says that she was very careful to observe all of the commandments (b. Sukk. 2b). Josephus also reports on a Roman woman of high rank, Fulvia by name, who had become a Jewish proselyte and was tricked by three Jewish men into giving them purple and gold, which they promised to deliver to the temple in Jerusalem, but which they actually kept for themselves (Ant. 18.3.5 §§ 81-84). In contrast to all of these references to female proselytes, Josephus mentions only one male proselyte in the Diaspora, Izates.

Some have argued that Poppaea Sabina, the wife of Nero, was perhaps a proselyte or at least favorably inclined to Judaism (Josephus, Ant. 20.8.11 § 195), but this is rather uncertain.<sup>18</sup>

The ancient Jewish inscriptions also support the theory that it was especially women who were attracted to Judaism. Of the seven or eight inscriptions from Italy which mention Jewish proselytes, five refer to women (CII 21, 202, 222, 462, 523), and only two or three to men (CII 68, 256, possibly 576). As for the

"God-fearers," Kuhn and Stegemann<sup>19</sup> count four inscriptions referring to women (CII 285, 524, 529, 642), and three referring to men (CII 5, 500, 642). According to their use of the term "God-fearer," CII 683a and 731e should be added to the list; the first refers to a man and the second to a woman. A. Thomas Kraabel, however, has recently called into question the existence of a clearly defined group of persons called by the technical term "God-fearers,"<sup>20</sup> and therefore caution is called for in the use of these materials.

Rabbinic literature also makes mention of female proselytes (e.g., m. Ketub. 4:3; b. Ber. 8b; b. Roš. Haš. 17b; b. B. Qam. 109b; b. Hor. 13a; b. Yebam. 46a, 78a, 84b; b. Ketub. 37a; Ger. 2.1, 4). In fact, as the following law from the Theodosian Code makes clear, women continued to become proselytes to Judaism even well into the Christian era (Cod. Theod. 16.8.6; August 13, 339):

Imp. Constantius A. ad Evagrium.

(Post alia:) Quod ad mulieres pertinet, quas Iudaei in turpitudinis suae duxere consortium in gynaeeo nostro ante versatas, placet easdem restitui gynaeeo idque in reliquum observari, ne Christianas mulieres suis iungant flagitiis vel, si hoc fecerint, capitali periculo subiugentur.

Dat. id. aug. Constantio A. ii cons.<sup>21</sup>

Emperor Constantius Augustus to Evagrius.

(After other matters.) In so far as pertains to the women who were formerly employed in Our imperial weaving establishment and who have been led by the Jews into the association of their turpitude, it is Our pleasure that they shall be restored to the weaving establishment. It shall be observed that Jews shall not hereafter unite Christian women to their villainy; if they should do so, however, they shall be subject to the peril of capital punishment.

Given on the ides of August in the year of the second consulship of Constantius Augustus.<sup>22</sup>

The only explanation for this law is that large numbers of Christian women had converted to Judaism. Had there only been isolated instances, such a law would be inexplicable. Placing Jewish missionary activity among Christian women under the death penalty must certainly have placed a damper on such activity; that the Roman lawgiver considered such a penalty necessary must indicate that the Jewish mission to women had been enjoying considerable success.

John Chrysostom attests, not to the conversion of women to Judaism, but to Christian women attending the Jewish New Year service in the Antioch of his time, as well as other synagogue services. Not surprisingly, Chrysostom condemns this practice with the sharpest of words, emphasizing that a Christian man is



the head of his wife and that he should keep his wife and his slave at home, not allowing them to go to the synagogue or the theater (*Adv. Jud.* 2.4-6; 4.3).<sup>23</sup>

All of this evidence for women being attracted by and converting to Judaism sheds a new light, not only on ancient Judaism in general, but also on the question of the make-up of new communities of the Diaspora. If large numbers of women in the ancient world converted to Judaism, then it could have been the case that in some communities women formed the majority. Further, if large numbers of women became proselytes, then why should we imagine that men were the only proselytizers? In the imperial weaving establishment, for example, one could visualize women workers, Jewish by birth or by conversion, discussing religious questions with their fellow weavers, inviting them to religious services or festivals and finally arranging for their conversion.

Further, women's attraction to Judaism may have had something to do with the nature of the Judaism to which they were attracted. Is it possible that these forms of Judaism were less restrictive regarding women than some of its forms known to us through history? This does not mean that women could not or have not converted to religions oppressive of women, which is simply a fact in the history of religions. If Judaism was especially appealing to women in the Roman world, however, scholarship must face the question why this was so and re-evaluate our understanding of ancient Judaism accordingly. The attractiveness of Judaism to women cannot be explained as a result of the presence of Jewish women title-bearers, but it is plausible to imagine that active, leading Jewish women were influential in attracting non-Jewish women to join the Jewish community. One clear point of connection between proselytes and women title-bearers is CII 523, in which Veturia Paulla, who had converted to Judaism sixteen years before her death, is called the mother of two synagogues. It is not surprising that a convert, who would have been an especially active member of the synagogue, should also have been involved in the leadership of it.



## CONCLUSION

The view that the titles in question were honorific is based less on evidence from the inscriptions themselves or from other ancient sources than on current presuppositions concerning the nature of ancient Judaism. Seen in the larger context of women's participation in the life of the ancient synagogue, there is no reason not to take the titles as functional, nor to assume that women heads or elders of synagogues had radically different functions than men heads or elders of synagogues. Of the functions outlined for each title, there are none which women could not have carried out. If women donated money, and even large sums of it, surely they were capable of collecting and administering synagogue funds. Nor is it impossible to imagine Jewish women sitting on councils of elders or teaching or arranging for the religious service. Even women carrying out judicial functions is not impossible in a tradition which reveres one of its women prophets (Deborah) as a judge. This is not to say that the women of these inscriptions might not have been exceptions. Indeed, they probably were. It is an exception today for women to hold positions of religious leadership. The point is not whether these women were exceptions or not, nor even whether they faced opposition or not--today's women rabbis, ministers and priests certainly do--but whether their titles were merely titles or whether they implied actual functions, just as for the men. It is my view that they were functional, and that if the women bearing these titles had been members of another Graeco-Roman religion, scholars would not have doubted that the women were actual functionaries. This collection of inscriptions should challenge historians of religion to question the prevailing view of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman period as a religion all forms of which a priori excluded women from leadership roles.

Further steps in research would be to consider these Jewish women leaders in the larger context of the history of religions, comparing their functions with those of women leaders in other communities and religions, such as the Isis, Demeter or Dionysus religions. It would also be especially useful to study possible connections between Judaism and Jewish Christianity. For example, it is striking that several early Christian women leaders were Jewish: the apostle Junia (Rom 16:7), the teacher and missionary Prisca (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Rom 16:3-4; 1 Cor