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Women Leaders in the Synagogue

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INTRODUCTION

It is my thesis that women served as leaders in a number of synagogues during the Roman and Byzantine periods. The evidence for this consists of nineteen Greek and Latin inscriptions in which women bear the titles "head of the synagogue," "leader," "elder," "mother of the synagogue" and "priestess." These inscriptions range in date from 27 B.C.E. to perhaps the sixth century C.E. and in provenance from Italy to Asia Minor, Egypt and Palestine. While new discoveries make this a growing corpus of material, a number of the inscriptions have been known to scholars for some time. The purpose of this dissertation, therefore, is not to present a hitherto unknown body of evidence, but rather to suggest a new interpretation of known material.

According to previous scholarly consensus, Jewish women did not assume positions of leadership in the ancient synagogue. Scholars have therefore interpreted the titles borne by women in these inscriptions as honorific. Samuel Krauss, for example, made the gender of the office holder a criterion for the functionality of the title: "The office of archon does not occur for women, and this is the best proof that we must regard archons as genuine, practicing officials of the *gerousia* or synagogue, in a way that one certainly could not have taken them from the ranks of the women."¹ This tradition of interpreting the titles borne by Jewish women as honorific has continued until the present day,² although in recent years several scholars have begun to question it, among them A. Thomas Kraabel, Dorothy Irvin and Shaye Cohen.³ Jeanne and Louis Robert also seem to view the titles as functional.⁴ In order to decide if the titles were functional or honorific it is necessary to examine each title and each inscription.