

WOMEN, PRIESTS AND THE JEWISH INSCRIPTIONS OF CRETE

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Many ancient authorities testify to the existence of a large and vigorous Jewish community on Crete. Indeed, our literary sources indicate that the Jewish presence there dates from at least the middle of the Hellenistic age and extends throughout later antiquity.¹ It is unfortunate that, despite these testimonies, the island has thus far yielded no more than four² Jewish inscriptions, yet even these few are

¹ See, for example, *I Macc.* 15:23, which cites the Cretan city of Gortyn as one of those to which the Roman Senate is said to have sent copies of its proclamation (probably in 139 BCE, but perhaps as early as 142) warning against the molestation of Jews. The claim of the Sibylline Oracle (*Or. Sib.* 3.271) that the entire land and sea was “full of Jews” must certainly have been made with Crete in mind, given its size and central location in the eastern Mediterranean. Josephus, who married in Rome a woman from a Cretan Jewish family, considered the Jews of Crete of sufficient number to make them worth mentioning as supporters of the imposter who, after the death of Herod the Great, sought to succeed him by impersonating his son, Alexander (*AJ* 17.324-38 and *BJ* 2.101-110). Philo (*Leg. ad Gaium* 282) noted that the island was among those countries with a large Jewish population by the early years of the Roman Empire, and the fact that Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.2) records a tradition according to which the Jews originated in the vicinity of Mt. Ida in central Crete, from which they supposedly derived the names of Idaei and, later, Judaei, argues for the popular association of the island and the people in the late first and early second centuries CE. Evidence for the continuing presence of Jews in Crete includes their persecution by Theodosius II in the fifth century. For a good study of the Jewish presence on Crete see S. Spyridakis, “Notes on the Jews of Gortyna and Crete,” *ZPE* 73 (1988) 171-75.

² *IC* I.5.17 and *CII* 731c are clearly Jewish. The classification of a third (*IC* IV.509, to be discussed below) is questionable, as is that of a fourth inscription, *IC* II.13.8 (Σανβάθις Ἐθμη μνάμας χάριον). The latter is included in the 1975 reprint of the *CII* (731b), but is designated as “dubious” in E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. by Geza Vermes et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) III: 71-72. On this question see S. Spyridakis, “*Inscriptiones Creticae* II.12.8: A Jewish Inscription?” *Harvard Theological Review* 82:2 (1989) 231-32. For discussions of Jewish, Christian and pagan use of the name Σανβάθις and its variant forms see V. Tcherikover, “The Sambathions,” in *CPI* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1957-64) 3.44, and B. Nystrom, “A Symbol of Hope from Thessalonica,” *Harvard Theological Review* 74:3 (1981) 325-330.

noteworthy. Two in particular possess religious and social significance which has not yet been duly noted.

The first is from a sepulchral plaque which marked the tomb of a certain Sophia from Gortyn:

Σοφία Γορτυνί
α πρεσβυτέρα
κέ ἀρχισυναγώ
γισσα Κισάμου ἔν
θα. Μνήμη δικέας
ἰς ἔῶνα. Ἀμήν.³

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This inscription was discovered at Kastelli Kissamou and assigned by L. Robert to the fourth or fifth century.⁴ Its significance lies partly in the fact that it reveals the existence of a Jewish population large enough to support a synagogue at Kisamos in the remote westernmost part of Crete. Further, the identification of Sophia as a woman of Gortyn raises the interesting question of why a resident of the island's metropolis and administrative center would have abandoned it in order to settle in faraway Kisamos. Stylianos Spyridakis has suggested the possibility that her emigration was prompted by the anti-Semitic policies of the eastern Roman emperor Theodosius II (408-50) and that the establishment of a synagogue in Kisamos was a direct consequence of official persecution elsewhere.⁵ This explanation is not without merit, for the emperor's measures are well-known for their severity and must certainly have brought about the dislocation of many who were affected by them. Still, we should not suppose that persons seeking refuge in Kisamos would have gained anything more than marginal improvement in their safety since, despite its relative isolation, the city was hardly obscure enough to escape imperial efforts to suppress Judaism.⁶

A more important consideration is the description of Sophia as πρεσβυτέρα and ἀρχισυναγωγίσσα. Instances of the application of these titles to women are rare, but not unfamiliar to students of Jewish epigraphy. Women are described as "elder" in Jewish sepulchral inscriptions from Thrace,⁷ North Africa,⁸ Apulia,⁹ and Rome,¹⁰ and as "leader of the synagogue" at Smyrna¹¹ and at Myndos in Caria.¹² But how are we to

³ A.C. Bandy, *The Greek Christian Inscriptions of Crete* (Athens: Christian Archaeological Society, 1970) appendix, no. 3 (= *CII* 731c).

⁴ *REG* 77 (1964) 215-216.

⁵ S. Spyridakis, "Notes on the Jews of Gortyna and Crete," *ZPE* 73 (1988) 174-75. For the religious policies of Theodosius II see especially J.W. Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1974).

⁶ Kisamos is known to have flourished during the Roman occupation of Crete and was mentioned by Hierocles in the sixth century (*Synecdemus* 650.13), when it served as an episcopal seat (*Notitiae Graecae episcopatum* 3.450, 10.561).

⁷ *CII* 692, from Bizye.

⁸ *SEG* 27, no. 1201, from a Jewish catacomb in Oea (modern Tripoli).

⁹ *CII* 581, 590 and 597, from a Jewish catacomb in Venosa.

¹⁰ *CII* 400.

¹¹ *CII* 741.

¹² *CII* 756.

interpret such cases? Did women really exercise the authority normally associated with these titles?

The scholarly consensus has always been that they did not, that such titles were merely honorific when given to women and conferred only in recognition of a woman's marriage to a synagogue official or, perhaps, of her piety or largesse. Thus, A.C. Bandy, who first published this inscription, states that, in the case of Sophia, "the former term [πρεσβυτέρα] implies that the deceased was the wife of an 'elder' or received this as an honorary title...while the latter [ἀρχισυναγωγίσσα], either that her husband was, in addition, the 'head of a synagogue' or that she received this too as a second honorary title."¹³

But recent research indicates that the role of women in the ancient synagogue may have been more significant than has been generally assumed. Of particular importance is the work of Bernadette Brooten, who argues in her *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* that women holding religious titles such as πρεσβυτέρα, ἀρχισυναγωγίσσα, ἀρχήγισσα, and even ἱέρεια/ἱέρισα exercised real authority in the synagogues of Palestine and the Diaspora. Basing her position on a careful examination of both epigraphic and literary sources, Brooten asserts that there is no reason to suppose any of the titles associated with the ancient synagogue was honorific, that there is no evidence in ancient Judaism of the custom of wives taking on their husbands' titles, and that, even if such evidence did exist, "this would not prove that the wives in question had no functions attached to their titles, nor would it prove that all Jewish women acquired their titles in this way."¹⁴ Thus, Brooten effectively challenges the older view that women did not hold functional synagogue titles and proposes in the case of the present inscription that, like her male counterparts, Sophia of Gortyn "must have been very actively involved in the affairs of the synagogue,"¹⁵ and particularly in "administration and exhortation." It should be noted that under this interpretation Sophia, as presbyter, would most likely have been a member of the synagogue's judicial council and had a share in the management of its finances.¹⁶ As leader of the synagogue, she occupied what T. Rajak and D. Noy, in their recent study of the ancient *archisynagogoi*,¹⁷ have called "the most visible office" associated with the synagogue¹⁸ and the one which "appears to incorporate verbally the very concept [i.e., of the synagogue] itself."¹⁹

It is significant that since the publication of her book Brooten's position has received support from various quarters. Rajak and Noy state that her "claim of functional

¹³ Bandy, p. 143, no. 3.

¹⁴ B. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, Brown Judaic Studies 36 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982) p. 10. Brooten also discusses the significance of inscriptions describing women as "leader" (ἀρχήγισσα), "mother of the synagogue" (μήτηρ συναγωγῆς) and "priestess" (ἱέρεια, ἱέρισα).

¹⁵ Brooten, p. 32.

¹⁶ Brooten, p. 55.

¹⁷ T. Rajak and D. Noy, "Archisynagogoi: Office, Title and Social Status in the Greco-Jewish Synagogue," *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993) 75-93.

¹⁸ Rajak and Noy, p. 75.

¹⁹ Rajak and Noy, p. 78.

Bandy²⁵ believes that the terms ἱερεὺς and ἄρχων, the inclusion of a patronymic (if a reading of Θεο[δοῦ]λο[υ] in lines 1-2 is correct) and the absence of “customary Christian vocabulary” tend to classify this inscription as Jewish, and that, if sepulchral, it marked a double tomb: “[This burial-place belongs] to lord Satyros, a priest, son of Theodoulos, and to Moses, head of the synagogue, who sought salvation with many toils.” Halbherr and Guarducci considered it Christian, and I have elsewhere²⁶ pointed to the possibility that it was dedicated by a certain Satyros in honor of a Christian priest who, like many others, had taken a biblical name — in this case, Moses. B. Lifshitz,²⁷ editor of the 1975 reprint of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*, is emphatic in describing the inscription as Christian, noting that the name Moses occurs frequently in Christian inscriptions but only rarely in Jewish ones, and also that the reference to σωτηρία is “apparently Christian.” This judgment strikes me as uncertain, however; the name Moses does occur with some frequency in Jewish epigraphy,²⁸ and there is ample evidence of the use of σωτηρία in Jewish, as well as Christian, inscriptions.²⁹ It may be that no compelling argument can be made for the classification of the stone as either Jewish or Christian, but this does not prevent us from considering its significance in each case.

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If it is in fact Jewish, the term ἱερεὺς is of particular importance, since in this case it bears witness to the role of priests in Jewish religious life long after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE.³⁰ Though it is often assumed that this event meant the end of priestly service, our sources indicate that priests (probably *kohanim* in the sense of “descendants of Aaron” or “persons of Levitical descent”³¹) continued to participate in the synagogue service and were held in high regard in Jewish communities. Both the Mishnah³² and the Palestinian Talmud³³ refer to priests, and especially to the priestly blessing. The Codex Theodosianus places priests at the head of its list of synagogue officials.³⁴ P.W. van der Horst has pointed out that in the third and fourth centuries their distinction was still so great that in the catacombs of Beth She’arim in Palestine a special room was reserved for them.³⁵ Priests are mentioned in inscriptions from Rome,³⁶

²⁵ Bandy reads: [κ]ῆρι Σατυρω Θεο[δοῦ]λο[υ] ἱερεῦ, Μωσῆ ἄρχων [τι] / [ζητη]ήσας <ι> ἐν πόνοις / [πολλ]οῖς σωτηρίαν.

²⁶ B. Nystrom, “*Inscriptiones Creticae* IV 509: An Ancient Christian Priest?” *ZPE* 50 (1983) p. 122.

²⁷ *CII* p. 89.

²⁸ E.g., *CII* 713 and 714.

²⁹ See, for example, *CII* 806-808, 811, 816, 1438.

³⁰ Among the ancient writers who mention the existence of other Jewish temples are Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.5), Tertullian (*De ieiuno* 16.6), whose references to *templa* do not appear to describe synagogues, and Josephus (*AJ* 13.3.1), who preserves a letter written by Onias IV to Ptolemy VI Philometer and Cleopatra II asking permission to build a temple in Leontopolis. See also Michael Stone, *Scriptures, Sects and Visions: A Profile of Judaism from Ezra to the Jewish Revolt* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 77-82, who mentions temples at Arad, Elephantine and Araq al-Emir, as well as at Leontopolis, and Stuart Miller, *Studies in the History and Traditions of Sepphoris* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), which includes interesting material about priests in Palestine after 70 CE.

³¹ P.W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* (Kampen: Pharos, 1991) p. 96.

³² For example, *m. Ber.* 5:4, *m. Meg.* 4:5-7 and *m. Sota* 7:6.

³³ *y. Ber.* 3.1.6-8.

³⁴ Codex Theodosianus 16.8.4 (issued December, 331)

³⁵ van der Horst, p. 96

³⁶ *CII* 346, 347, 355 and 375.

Ephesus,³⁷ Cilicia,³⁸ and in Egyptian papyri.³⁹ Yet, despite the evidence for the existence of large Jewish communities in the islands of the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the epigraphic record makes no other mention of Jewish priests there. This inscription, if Jewish, adds to the evidence of their role in Jewish life in late antiquity and lends support to those ancient authorities who described Crete as one of the flourishing centers of the Diaspora.

³⁷ *CII* 746.

³⁸ *CII* 785.

³⁹ *CPJ* 120, 121 and 139.