

B. The Meaning of "Head of the Synagogue"

1. Literary References to the Title

In comparison with other titles of synagogue office, we have at our disposal considerable literary evidence for the title head of the synagogue. The sources, Jewish, Christian and pagan, include references to both Palestinian and Diaspora synagogues.⁴⁸

For the first century, some of the best evidence is found in the New Testament. Mark 5:22,35,36,38 and the parallel Luke 8:49 mention an archisynagōgos, Jairos by name, whose daughter is healed by Jesus. Interesting for our question is the parallel to Mark 5:22, Luke 8:41, where instead of archisynagōgos, Luke writes archōn tēs synagōgēs. That Luke considers the two to be synonymous is shown by his use of archisynagōgos in 8:49. In Matt 9:18,23 we read neither archōn tēs synagōgēs nor archisynagōgos but rather simply archōn. Does this mean that all three titles are synonymous?

Mention should be made here of a textual variant to Acts 14:2 found in the Western text (D, partially supported by syr^{hmg} and cop^{G67}). Instead of, "The unbelieving Jews stirred up and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against the brothers" (i.e., Paul and Barnabas) the Western text has, "The heads of the synagogue of the Jews and the archons of the synagogue (syr^{hmg} omits "of the synagogue," which would give the general meaning of "rulers," possibly identifying them as the rulers of Iconium) stirred up for themselves persecution against the righteous."⁴⁹ Important here is the distinction between "heads of the synagogue" and "archons of the synagogue." One should keep in mind, however, that this is a later textual variant, which cannot be used as first-century evidence of this distinction.⁵⁰ Further, this textual addition was made by a Christian, who may have had very little knowledge of a Jewish distinction between heads of the synagogue and archons, which would leave us to explain the seeming identification of head of the synagogue, archon of the synagogue and archon found in a synoptic comparison of the Jairos story, as well as within Luke himself (Lk 8:41 vs. 8:49). One could assume that either the identification found in the Jairos story or the distinction made in the Acts textual variant reflects actual Jewish practice or one could assume that the authors in question were not particularly familiar with Jewish synagogue organization and used the titles loosely. This could well be the case with Luke and the author of the textual addition

to Acts 14:2. It is difficult, however, to assume that Matthew, who was writing for Jewish-Christians, would have been unfamiliar with the organizational structure of the synagogue.⁵¹ Perhaps the problem can only be solved by assuming that titular practice varied as to geography and time. At any rate, since two Italian inscriptions (CII 265 from Rome: *Stafulus, archōn* and *archi-synagōgos*; CII 553 from Capua: *Alfius Juda, archōn, archisynagōgos*)⁵² give further attestation of a distinction between the two offices, it is probably safe to assume they were usually distinct.

A second question raised by the Jairos passage is whether there was more than one synagogue head in each synagogue (Mark 5:22: "one of the heads of the synagogue, Jairos by name"), but the meaning could simply be that Jairos was one of the class of heads of the synagogue rather than that several synagogue heads served in one synagogue.

Luke 13:10-17 is more instructive as to one of the functions of head of the synagogue. When Jesus healed a woman at the synagogue on the sabbath, the head of the synagogue, "indignant because Jesus had healed on the sabbath, said to the people, 'There are six days in which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the sabbath day'" (Luke 13:14). From this passage it would seem that the head of the synagogue was responsible for keeping the congregation faithful to the Torah.

The Acts of the Apostles attests to the office of head of the synagogue in first-century Diaspora Judaism. When Paul and Barnabas come to Antioch of Pisidia and attend the synagogue service on the sabbath, the heads of the synagogue invite them to give a word of exhortation to the people immediately following the reading of the law and the prophets (Acts 13:15). The plural "heads of the synagogue" is not insignificant here, for the only reasonable interpretation is that this synagogue possessed not just one head of the synagogue, but several. Further, their inviting Paul and Barnabas to give the sermon indicates a leadership role in the planning and organizing of the service, as well as the role of representative of the congregation vis-à-vis the visitors from abroad.

In Acts 18:1-17, which describes Paul's missionary activity in Corinth, we also find more than one head of the synagogue (Acts 18:8: Crispus, who had become a believer in Jesus; Acts 18:17: Sosthenes, who had not)⁵³ in a single community, although from the passage it is not clear that they served in the same

synagogue. It seems probable that Sosthenes, who in Acts 18:17 is said to have been beaten by the crowd before the judgment seat of Gallio, is the leader of the group of Jews who had attacked Paul and dragged him before the proconsul Gallio with the complaint that Paul was "persuading people to worship God contrary to the law" (Acts 18:13). If Sosthenes was indeed the leader of this delegation, this would point to a function of leadership similar to the one we saw in Luke 13:10-17, where the head of the synagogue warned against transgressing the Torah by breaking the sabbath. Sosthenes' involvement indicates a sense of responsibility for keeping his people faithful to the law, as interpreted by him, as well as a representative role over against the Roman proconsul.

As for rabbinic sources on the first century, one must consider a Mishnaic passage, Yoma 7:1 (parallels: m. Soṭa 7:7,8). The context is the reading from the Torah on Yom Kippur (in m. Soṭa the septennial Sukkot reading of the Torah):

חזן הכנסת נוטל ספר תורה ונוחננו לראש הכנסת,
וראש הכנסת נוחננו לסגן, והסגן נוחננו לכהן גדול.
וכהן גדול עומד ומקבל וקורא עומד.

The sexton of the synagogue takes the Torah scroll and gives it to the head of the synagogue (or: of the assembly), and the head of the synagogue gives it to the adjutant high priest, and the adjutant high priest gives it to the high priest. The high priest stands and receives and reads it standing.⁵⁴

Due to the etymological similarity between r'ōš hakkēneset and archisynagōgos, the identification between the two is likely. Since it is unclear what would be the purpose of a synagogue on the temple mount, and since Josephus⁵⁵ and the Mishnaic tractate Middot do not mention such a synagogue in their descriptions of the temple, Frowald Hüttenmeister⁵⁶ and others go against the older interpretation by doubting that such a synagogue existed. Sydney Hoenig translates r'ōš hakkēneset as "head of the assembly" and hazzān as "overseer of the assembly." He believes that they were "Pharisaic leaders of the Anshé Maamad who were stationed in the Temple as the lay participants alongside the Sadducean officiants."⁵⁷ If such were to be the case, this would be a rather different meaning of head of the synagogue than is attested elsewhere, i.e., the synagogue head as leader of an individual synagogue. An alternative proposal which would not presuppose the existence of a synagogue on the temple

mount, would be that the hazzan and the r'ōš hakkēneset mentioned here were synagogue functionaries in one of the many synagogues of Jerusalem and were selected for the special honor of passing the Torah scroll to the high priest in the Yom Kippur (and Sukkot) services. The number of persons in the chain of passing certainly seems more than absolutely necessary and must therefore have something to do with honor. According to this interpretation, the hazzan and the r'ōš hakkēneset would be the two representatives of synagogue officials (or of the laity, as Hoenig suggests) in the festival service.

The only r'ōš bēt hakkēneset known to us by name from rabbinic literature is Shagbion (šGBIWN, variant Shavion, šBIWN), who was r'ōš bēt hakkēneset (note the alternative form of the title)⁵⁸ in Akhziv in the time of Rabban Gamliel (II), i.e., in the second half of the first century.⁵⁹

The later rabbinic evidence is no less scattered than the material discussed thus far. One is once again reminded of how much the rabbinic authorities differed from their Christian neighbors, the latter producing numerous and complex church orders, while the former displayed little interest in defining the duties of the respective synagogue officers. After the Mishnaic passages discussed above, the earliest rabbinic evidence is found in t. Meg. 4.21 (Zuck. 227): "The head of the synagogue should not read (from the scripture) until others have told him that there is no one."⁶⁰ Could this imply that the head of the synagogue was responsible for asking others to read, but did not read himself (or herself)?⁶¹ This would fit in well with Acts 13:15, where the heads of the synagogue ask Paul and Barnabas to preach (rather than preaching themselves).

In b. Pesah 49b (top) a list has been put together for the young man seeking a wife. It forms a sort of catalogue of highly respected positions in Judaism:

חנו רבנן: לעולם ימכור אדם כל מה שיש לו
 וישא בת חלמיד חכם. לא מצא בת חלמיד חכם
 ישא בת גדולי הדור. לא מצא בת גדולי הדור
 ישא בת ראשי כנסיות, לא מצא בת ראשי כנסיות
 ישא בת גבאי צדקה. לא מצא בת גבאי צדקה
 ישא בת מלמדי חינוך. ולא ישא בת עמי הארץ,
 מפני שהן שקץ, ונשותיהן שרץ, ועל בנוחיהן
 הוא אומע "ארור שכב עם כל בהמה".

Our rabbis taught: Let a man always sell all he has and marry the daughter of a scholar. If he does not find the daughter of a scholar, let him marry the daughter of [one of] the great men of the generation. If he does not find the daughter of [one of] the great men of the generation, let him marry the daughter of a head of synagogues. If he does not

find the daughter of a head of synagogues, let him marry the daughter of a charity treasurer. If he does not find the daughter of a charity treasurer, let him marry the daughter of an elementary school teacher, but let him not marry the daughter of an 'am ha-aretz because they are detestable and their wives are vermin, and of their daughters it is said, "Cursed be he that lieth with any manner of beast" (Deut 27:21).⁶²

This passage shows which positions the rabbis considered to be the highest; head of the synagogue is listed third, after scholar and great men of the generation (probably a title of civic leadership) and before charity treasurer and children's teacher. This view is from a particular perspective, and it is therefore easy to understand why scholar would rank highest. One must be cautious about using this list as an objective presentation of how all Jews would have ranked professions and offices. Given this particular perspective, slot number three in the list may well imply that the head of the synagogue was normally a person of some learning. The whole thrust of the advice given here is not to marry the daughter of an 'am ha-aretz, i.e., the contrast is between ignorance of the law and knowledge of it. This confirms the image of the head of the synagogue which has been emerging from the literary passages referred to thus far.

A further sign of the honor in which the rabbis held the head of the synagogue is the directive in a baraita to drink a glass of wine in honor of the head of the synagogue at a funeral ceremony (y. Ber. 6a.28-29).⁶³

Several fourth-century laws preserved in the Theodosian Code further attest that the head of the synagogue was one of the main synagogue officials. Cod. Theod. 16.8.4 reads:

Idem A. hierois et archisynagogis et patribus synagogarum et ceteris, qui in eodem loco deservunt. Hierois et archisynagogos et patres synagogarum et ceteros, qui synagogis deservunt, ab omni corporali munere liberos esse praecipimus. Dat. kal. dec. Constant(ino)p(oli) Basso et Ablavio cons.⁶⁴

The same Augustus to the priests, heads of the synagogues, fathers of the synagogues, and all others who serve in the said place.

We command that priests, heads of the synagogues, fathers of the synagogues, and all others who serve the synagogues shall be free from every compulsory public service of a corporal nature.

Given on the kalends of December at Constantinople in the year of the consulship of Bassus and Ablavius (December 1, 331; 330).⁶⁵

The legal assumption is that since these officials are already fulfilling a munus, they should be liberated from the public munera corporalia.⁶⁶ Cod. Theod. 16.8.13 from the year 397 reaffirms certain privileges for synagogue heads and other Jewish officials, among which are the exemption from the forced public service of decurions and the right to live according to their own laws.

Idem AA. Caesario p(raefecto) p(raetori)o. Iudaei sint obstricti caerimoniis suis: nos interea in conservandis eorum privilegiis veteres imitemur, quorum sanctionibus definitum est, ut privilegia his, qui inlustrium patriarcharum dicioni subiecti sunt, archisynagogis patriarchisque ac presbyteris ceterisque, qui in eius religionis sacramento versantur, nutu nostri numinis perseverent ea, quae venerandae Christianae legis primis clericis sanctimonia deferuntur. Id enim et divi principes Constantinus et Constantius, Valentinianus et Valens divino arbitrio decreverunt. Sint igitur etiam a curialibus muneribus alieni pareantque legibus suis. Dat. kal. ivl. Caesario et Attico cons.⁶⁷

The same Augustuses to Caesarius, Praetorian Prefect. Jews shall be bound by their own ritual. Meanwhile, in preserving their privileges, We shall imitate the ancients by whose sanctions it has been determined that privileges shall be preserved for those who are subject to the rule of the Illustrious Patriarchs, for the heads of the synagogues, the patriarchs, and the elders, and all the rest who are occupied in the ceremonial of that religion, namely those privileges according to the consent of Our Imperial Divinity, which by virtue of their holy office are conferred on the chief clergy of the venerable Christian religion. The foregoing, indeed, was decreed by the divine imperial authority of the sainted Emperors Constantine and Constantius, Valentinian and Valens. Such Jews shall therefore be exempt from the compulsory public services of decurions and shall obey their own laws.

Given on the kalends of July in the year of the consulship of Caesarius and Atticus (July 1, 397).⁶⁸

While these two laws do not give us actual details of any of the concrete functions of synagogue heads, Cod. Theod. 16.8.14 from the year 399, under the emperor Honorius, does:

Idem AA. Messalae p(raefecto) p(raetori)o. Superstitionis indignae est, ut archisynagogi sive presbyteri Iudaeorum vel quos ipsi apostolos vocant, qui ad exigendum aurum adque argentum a patriarcha certo tempore diriguntur, a singulis synagogis exacta summam adque susceptam ad eundem reportent. Qua de re omne, quidquid considerata temporis ratione confidimus esse collectum, fideliter ad nostrum dirigatur aerarium: de cetero autem nihil praedicto decernimus esse mittendum. Noverint igitur populi Iudaeorum removisse nos depraedationis huiusmodi functionem. Quod si qui ab illo depopulatore Iudaeorum ad hoc officium exactionis fuerint directi, iudicibus offerantur, ita ut tamquam in legum nostrarum violatores sententia proferatur. Dat. iii id. april. Med(iolano) Theodoro v. d. cons.⁶⁹

The same Augustuses to Messala, Praetorian Prefect. It is characteristic of an unworthy superstition that the heads of the synagogues or the elders of the Jews or those whom they themselves call apostles, who are dispatched by the patriarch at a certain time to collect gold and silver, should bring back to the patriarch the sum which has been exacted and collected from each of the synagogues. Wherefore, everything that We are confident has been collected, taking into consideration the period of time, shall be faithfully dispatched to Our treasury. For the future, moreover, We decree that nothing shall be sent to the aforesaid patriarch. The people of the Jews shall know, therefore, that We have abolished the practice of such depredation. But if any persons should be sent on such a mission of collection by that despoiler of the Jews, they shall be brought before the judges, in order that a sentence may be pronounced against them as violators of Our laws.

Given on the third day before the ides of April at Milan in the year of the consulship of the Most Noble Theodorus (April 11, 399).⁷⁰

The practice presupposed here is a continuation of the ancient practice of each male Jew annually contributing a half-shekel to support the temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the temple, a similar practice grew in its stead, with the money going to support the patriarch in Palestine. From this description, one could assume that the synagogue heads and presbyters collect money in their individual synagogues and then turn it over to the apostles who have been sent by the patriarch to collect the money and to bring it back to him. One could also interpret the passage to mean that some of the money was brought directly by synagogue heads and elders, while some of it was brought by the apostles sent out for this purpose.⁷¹

The value of these three laws is that they give an outsider's view, i.e., that of the lawgiver, of the internal leadership structure of the synagogue. In the eye of the lawgiver, the head of the synagogue was one of the main, if not the main, synagogue functionaries.

Several patristic sources make reference to synagogue heads. In *Dialogue with Trypho* 137, Justin Martyr (died ca. 165) delivers the following exhortation to Jews:

Συμφάμενοι οὖν μὴ λοιδορῆτε ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, μηδὲ
Φαρισαίοις πειθόμενοι διδασκάλοις τὸν βασιλέα τοῦ Ἰσρα-
ὴλ ἐπισκώπητέ ποτε, ὅποῦα διδάσκουσιν οἱ ἀρχισυνάγωγοι
ὕμῶν, μετὰ τὴν προσευχὴν.⁷²

Do not agree to abuse the Son of God, nor follow the Pharisees as teachers in jesting at the King of Israel, as your synagogue heads teach you, according to the prayer.

While the polemical nature of this passage must serve as a warning not to accept it at face value, the image of head of the synagogue as spiritual and intellectual leader in no way contradicts what we have seen up to this point; it rather confirms it.

Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 315-403), in his discussion of the Jewish-Christian Ebionites, writes:

Αναγκάζουσι δέ, καὶ παρ' ἡλικίαν ἐγκαμίζουσι τοὺς νέους, ἐξ ἐπιτροπῆς δὴθεν τῶν παρ' αὐτοῖς διδασκάλων. Πρεσβυτέρους γάρ οὗτοι ἔχουσι καὶ ἀρχισυναγώγους. Συναγωγὴν δὲ οὗτοι καλοῦσι τὴν εἰαυτῶν ἐκκλησίαν, καὶ οὐχὶ ἐκκλησίαν, τῷ Χριστῷ δὲ ὀνόματι μόνον σεμνύονται.

Their young men, having attained the marriageable age, are given to marriage under coercion, on account of a decision of their teachers, for they have elders and synagogue heads, and they call their church a synagogue and not a church and honor Christ in name only.⁷³

It seems that the Jewish-Christians described here maintained the traditional synagogue organizational structure. While we do not know to what extent Epiphanius actually had direct contact with Jewish-Christians, there seems no reason to doubt that Jewish-Christians would have maintained Jewish organizational structures. If this bit of information is not a reflection of the fourth century, then it may have come down to Epiphanius from his sources and reflect an earlier period. What is interesting here is that synagogue heads and elders are classified as teachers.

Palladius, in his Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom, probably written around 408 in Syene in Egypt, states that the ("corrupt and falsely named") patriarch of the Jews changes yearly, as do the synagogue heads, in order to gain wealth, for the buying and selling of the priesthood is a Jewish (and Egyptian) custom.⁷⁴ The context of this statement is a discussion of six bishops who were accused of having attained their office by the payment of money, whereby the Christian rejection of the practice is contrasted with the Jewish tolerance of it. Given this polemical purpose, one should be more sceptical of taking this remark at face value than is Jean Juster, who notes, "This text proves that the archisynagogue was nominated for a term."⁷⁵ Palladius himself does not state that he is personally familiar with this Jewish practice, but rather employs the vague introductory formula "it is said" (*phasi*).

Several further Christian sources do not seem reliable enough to warrant a detailed discussion. The Acts of Pilate,⁷⁶ which mentions heads of the synagogue throughout, seems to have drawn upon a sort of catalogue of known Jewish titles (synagogue

heads, Levites, elders, priests, high priests) and combined them at random to create scenes in which Jewish leaders debated and deliberated in council meetings. Further, the passages in Ambrose⁷⁷ and Jerome⁷⁸ cited by Juster to support his theory that synagogue heads had to have a knowledge of medicine, do not seem particularly convincing to me.

Pagan authors were also familiar with the title. In Flavius Vopiscus' Life of Saturninus 8, Scriptores Historiae Augustae 3.398-399 is preserved a letter from the emperor Hadrian (117-138) to his brother-in-law Servianus. Among the various negative comments about Egypt we read:

Illic qui Serapem colunt Christiani sunt, et devoti sunt Serapi qui se Christi episcopos dicunt. Nemo illic archisynagogus Iudaeorum, nemo Samarites, nemo Christianorum presbyter non mathematicus, non haruspex, non aliptes.

Those who worship Serapis are in fact Christians, and those who call themselves bishops of Christ are, in fact, devotees of Serapis. There is no head of the Jewish synagogue, no Samaritan, no Christian elder, who is not an astrologer, a soothsayer, or an anointer.⁷⁹

Of interest here is the parallelization between Christian bishop, Christian elder and Jewish synagogue head.⁸⁰ This is a further attestation that the title was well known.

The emperor Alexander Severus (222-235) was called the "Syrian archisynagogus"⁸¹ by his opponents, most likely because he was friendly to the Jewish people. This simply serves to underscore that "head of the synagogue" was the official Jewish title most widely known in the ancient world.

2. Inscriptional References to the Title

Well over thirty Greek and Latin inscriptions making mention of synagogue heads are known to modern scholarship.⁸² Of these, three make reference to women synagogue heads. The geographical spread is large: Italy,⁸³ Greece,⁸⁴ Macedonia,⁸⁵ Moesia,⁸⁶ Asia Minor,⁸⁷ Cyprus,⁸⁸ Syria,⁸⁹ Palestine,⁹⁰ and Africa.⁹¹ The chronological span is also considerable, ranging from before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.⁹² until well into the Byzantine period.

What can we learn from these inscriptions about the function of the synagogue head? Taking note of the fact that a number of synagogue heads are mentioned as donating portions of the synagogue or of restoring the synagogue,⁹³ it is tempting to conclude that the head of the synagogue was in charge of maintaining the