CHAPTER V

WOMEN AS PRIESTS

A. The Inscriptional Evidence for Female Priests

There exist three ancient Jewish inscriptions in which a woman bears the title hiericia/hierissa. They range in age from the first century B.C.E. through possibly the fourth century C.E. and were found in Tell el-Yahudiyyeh in Lower Egypt, in Beth She'arim in Galilee, and in Rome.

Tell el-Yahudiyyeh

CII 1514 (SEG 1 [1923] no. 574). Rectangular stele, 45 cm in height, 22 cm in breadth, with an indented space ruled for the inscription, but without architectural decoration.

 Municipi
 2 ιέρισια χρηστή πα-
 4 σύμφωνα κ-
 6 αι ψυχαίτων χαίρει, ω-
 8 ες έτοιν υ'.
 L γ' Καίσαρ Π-
 10 αυτι γτ'.
 L. 9: read λυκάβαντος γ' Καίσαρος.

O Marin, priest, good and a friend to all, causing pain to no one and friendly to your neighbors, farewell! (She died at the age of) approximately fifty years, in the third year of Caesar (Augustus), on the thirteenth day of Payni (= June 7, 28 B.C.E.).

C. C. Edgar, who first published the inscription in 1922, thought that IERISA was "the name of Marion's father; whether it is an indeclinable noun or whether this is a genitive in -α I do not know." Edgar thus thought that Marion's father's name was IERISAS or IERISA. This rather strange interpretation of a not uncommon Greek noun was corrected the following year by Hans Lietzmann, who recognized it to be hieris(s)a, "priestess" (Priesterin). The name Marin is a form of Marion and also occurs in other Greek inscriptions.

This is one of eighty Jewish inscriptions found in a Jewish necropolis in Tell el-Yahudiyyeh. Many of the inscriptions are dated; CII 1466, 1492, 1493, 1498 are also from the time of
Augustus. The terminology (χριστία, πασιφίλε, ἀλύψ) and form of our inscriptions (name followed by adjectives, χαίρε, approximate age at death, year, day of Egyptian month) are very similar to the terminology and form of the other Tell el-Yahudiyyeh inscriptions, both of those from the time of Augustus and of the others, which range from the second century B.C.E. through the first century C.E.

As with the other inscriptions in which women bear titles, modern scholars have been at pains to point out that hierisa here has no real meaning, e.g., Jean-Baptiste Frey, "This is not to say that Marin had an actual function as a priestess in the Jewish community, but rather that she belonged to the descendants of Aaron, to the priestly family . . . . "

For the interpretation of hiersia, it is rather significant that the Marin inscription was found in Tell el-Yahudiyyeh, i.e., the ancient Leontopolis in the nome of Heliopolis, for it was in Leontopolis that Onias IV, the legitimate heir to the Jerusalem high priesthood, founded a Jewish temple during the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometer and Cleopatra II (181–146 B.C.E.), when he saw that he had no chance of attaining the Jerusalem high priesthood due to events surrounding the Maccabean revolt. He founded the temple, probably around 160 B.C.E., by renovating and purifying an Egyptian temple. (On the Onias temple, see Josephus, J.W. 1.1.1 § 33; 7.10.2–4 §§ 420–436; Ant. 12.9.7 §§ 387–388; 13.3.1–3 §§ 62–73; 13.10.4 §§ 285; 20.10.3 § 236.) Josephus reports (Ant. 13.3.3 § 73) that "Onias found some Jews who, like him, were priests and Levites to minister there" (εὖρε δὲ ὦνιας καὶ Ἰουδαίων τινῶν εὐλογῶν αὐτῷ καὶ ἔρετες καὶ λευτάς τοὺς ἐκεῖ ἑρωκεκύςαντας, cf. Ant. 13.3.1 § 63; J.W. 7.10.3–4 §§ 430–434). The temple of Onias existed, and Jewish priests served at it, until 73 C.E. or shortly before 73, when the Romans closed it (Josephus, J.W. 7.10.2–4 §§ 420–436).

The later rabbis are still familiar with the temple of Onias, the sacrificial service of which they view with some ambivalence, but which they are willing to recognize as valid under certain limited circumstances. (See m. Menah. 13:10; t. Menah. 13.12–14 [Zuck. 533]; b. Meg. 10a; b. Menah. 109; y. Yoma 43c.64–43d.6; y. Sanh. 19a.9.) One should view the Onias temple in the context of other Jewish temples outside of Jerusalem. The very existence of these various cultic sites raises the question of pluralism within the Jewish cult.
Priests

Rome

CII 315.9 Plaque of white marble, 19 cm in height, 35 cm in width, 3.7 cm in breadth, from the Monteverde catacomb in the Via Portuensis.

\[\text{'Ευδάδε κυρε} \]

\[2 \text{Γαυδεντία κυρε} \]

\[\text{τέρσα ἑτὸν} \]

\[4 \text{'Εν άρήνη ἥ} \]

\[\text{κολύμης αῖ} \]

\[6 \text{τῆς.} \]

L. 1. read κυρεταλ.
L. 4. read άρην.

Here lies Gaudentia, priest, (aged) 24 years. In peace be her sleep!

On the basis of the form of the carved letters, in particular of the μυ, which is nearly cursive, the inscription is probably from the third or fourth century C.E. The menorah and the Torah shrine (with open doors revealing five shelves and six compartments) attest to the Jewishness of the inscription. Torah shrines also occur on other Jewish inscriptions from the Monteverde catacomb (cf. CII 327[4th C.], 343, 401[3rd C.], 460[3rd/4th C.]). Möller and Bees suggest that the Torah shrine may be a special symbol of Gaudentia's priestly ancestry and that the Roman Jewish community, with its limited knowledge of Hebrew, may have identified Ἀρῶν (Torah shrine) with Aaron. The depiction of an Ἀρῶν would indicate descendancy from Aaron. Since, however, this is the only one of the Monteverde inscriptions embellished by a Torah shrine which was dedicated to a person of priestly class, their suggestion is not convincing. The Torah shrine, like the other Jewish symbols which ornament ancient epitaphs, may simply indicate that the deceased was Jewish.

The name Gaudentia10 also appears in another inscription from the Monteverde catacomb in the Via Portuensis, CII 314, where the bearer of the name is the daughter of a man named Oklatios. The male (?) form of the name, IΓαυδεντίς (Gaudentios?), occurs in CII 316, which is also from the Monteverde catacomb.

Four, possibly five, men bear the title *hierius* in inscriptions from the Monteverde catacomb: CII 346, 347 (twice), 375, 355 (?). These will be discussed below.11

As for the meaning of *hierisa*, modern commentators follow the pattern we have seen elsewhere. Harry J. Leon writes:

One woman, Gaudentia (315), is styled a *hierisa*. This is apparently the equivalent of the Hebrew *cohenet* and probably designates the wife (or daughter) of a *hierius*. It could hardly point to a priestly function for a woman, since no priestesses are to be found in the Jewish worship. Father Frey thought that the title must denote a feminine member of the priestly family of Aaron.12

Frey himself writes, "τέρεια, literally 'priestess,' cannot, in the present case, mean anything other than a member of the priestly family of Aaron."13

Beth She'arim

CII 1007.14 Painted in red above and to the right of arcosolium 2 of Hall K in Catacomb 1, 38 cm in length and 26 in height, with the height of the letters varying from 3 to 5 cm.

Σαρα Συγάτηρ
2 Ναιμίας ήν
την Τερείας
4 κύρα Μαρκείνας
tov Suterias
[εν][θερείας].

L. 4. read κύρας.

Sara, daughter of Naimia, mother of the priest, Lady Maria, lies here.

The inscription should probably be dated to the fourth century C.E.15 Schwabe and Lifshitz argue that Sara's corpse had been brought from abroad, perhaps from Palmyra, for burial in Beth She'arim.16 The specific evidence for this case, however, namely nails and chips of wood found in her resting place, is not particularly convincing. The title *kyra*, "Lady," is not uncommon among the Greek inscriptions of Beth She'arim.17 The name of Sara's father, *Naimia*, is the equivalent of the Hebrew *Nehemyah*.18 Note that Sara's father is not called a priest.19

On the meaning of *hierisa*, Schwabe and Lifshitz write:

Particularly the use of the title τέρεια is most interesting. Sarah, the mother of Miriam the priestess, was not a priestess herself and neither was her daughter. Miriam was a *cohenet*, i.e., the wife of a *cohen*. The relatives of the deceased wanted to indicate in the epitaph that Sarah was the mother of a *cohen's* wife. We cannot find a better proof.
of the high social status of the priests in the Jewish community. 20

Since Sara's father is not called a priest, it is indeed unlikely that Sara was the daughter of a priest, and therefore a priest herself. Why Maria, however, who is called a priest, should not after all be one, is unclear. The meaning of cohenet (כֹּהֵן) will be discussed below. 21

CII 1085. Frey, on the basis of a communication with Moshe Schwabe, gives the following transcription:

2 mai $\ldots$ ]
2 καὶ Σάρα[ς θυγατρός? $\ldots$
4 Μαρία[ας $\ldots$] 22

[Tomb of . . . ], priest (?), and of Sara,[daughter of?] Naimia and of Maria . . . .

Schwabe and Lifshitz (Beth She'arim no. 68) state that the inscription is set above an arcosolium in room III of Hall K in Catacomb 1, and is 26 cm in length and 10 cm in height, with the letters being 3 cm high. According to them, line 1 is incised, and lines 2-4 are painted in red. Their reading is:

Καὶ Σάρα [Θυγάτρ.]
2 [τῷ Ν]αμιᾶς καὶ [μητέρος?]
Μαρία[ας ἵπτερος [ας?] 23

And Sara, daughter of Naimia and mother of the priest Maria.

Note that Frey has a line above the first line of Schwabe and Lifshitz. The difference between the two transcriptions should be sufficient evidence for the illegibility of this one inscription. A major difficulty with the Schwabe and Lifshitz transcription and reconstruction is that it is based on the assumption that two women, both by the name of Sara, both daughters of men named Naimia, and both mothers of priests named Maria, were buried at approximately the same time in the same hall, an assumption which is rather unlikely. Due to the uncertain reading of this inscription, it will not be considered as evidence for the title hierieia.

B. Possible Interpretations of hierieia/hierissa

There exist several possibilities for interpreting this term in our inscriptions: