Women Leaders in the Synagogue

scholar who would categorically deny that a woman may have functioned as a priest in a Jewish temple in Leontopolis*. The mention in several ancient authors of Jewish "temples" should remind us just how little we know about Jewish worship in this period.

3. Hieries/hierissa could denote a synagogue function

To some, synagogue function may seem as incredible an interpretation as cultic function. Is it not the case that the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. and the closing of the Jewish temple in Leontopolis in or shortly before 73 C.E. saw the end of priestly cultic service? Ancient sources show that the situation is not that simple. We know that priests continued to give the priestly blessing even after the destruction of the temple. (This practice has continued until our own day.) The priestly blessing in the synagogue is a continuation of the priests' blessing of the people in the temple, a practice which is based on Num 6:22-27. Whether the priestly blessing in the synagogue was practiced already during the time of the Second Temple is not clear. There is evidence that the practice of having a priest be the first to read from the Torah during the synagogue service is an ancient one. 

M. Git. 5:8 reads:

These are the things which they ordained because of peace: a priest is the first to read (from the Torah) and after him a Levite, and after him a common Israelite, for the sake of peace.

Philo of Alexandria also attests to the priests being preferred as readers (Hypothetica 7.13):

And indeed they do always assemble and sit together, most of them in silence except when it is the practice to add something to signify approval of what is read. But some priest who is present or one of the elders reads the holy
Priests

laws to them and expounds them point by point till about the late afternoon, when they depart having gained both expert knowledge of the holy laws and considerable advance in piety.

According to this description of a sabbath service at the time of Philo, which is presumably a reflection of Alexandrian practice, a priest or elder reads a scriptural passage and then delivers a sermon on it. In this passage, Philo is referring to general Jewish practice and not to one of the Jewish sects. The practice presupposed here is different from the rabbinic ideal expressed in m. Git. 5:8. According to Philo, one person reads the entire passage, whereas m. Git. 5:8 ordains that more than one person should read. Philo does not state that the priest has preference over the elder, but the priest is mentioned first. Perhaps a priest, if present, was given preference, and otherwise one of the elders read and preached.

In addition to the ancient evidence for these two priestly practices in the synagogue, i.e., the priestly blessing and the preference for priestly readers, the Theodosian Code contains a rather surprising reference to priests as synagogue functionaries. The word "priest" (in the plural: hiereis, used as a foreign word in the Latin text) occurs only once in reference to Jews in the Theodosian Code (16.8.4, given on December 1, 331):

Idem A. hiereis et archisynagogis et patribus synagogarum et ceteris, qui in eodem loco deserviunt. Hieros et archisynagogos et patres synagogarum et ceteros, qui synagogis deserviunt, ab omni corporali munere liberos esse praecipimus.  

The same Augustus to the priests, heads of the synagogues, fathers of the synagogues, and all those 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 service of a corporal nature.

This law has been discussed above in the context of mothers/ fathers of the synagogues and of heads of the synagogue. Important for the present context is the inclusion of hiereis among others who serve in the synagogue, including heads of the synagogues and fathers of the synagogue. There are two possible explanations for the Roman lawgiver's having included hiereis in this law:

1. Christians, in writing the law, used the general Christian and pagan term for official religious functionary, not realizing that Jewish priests were not synagogue functionaries.
2. The authors of the law were well-informed of the inner workings of the synagogue, and this law is therefore an attestation of the Jewish priest's having been a synagogue functionary in this period. In support of the first possibility, the increasing use of *hiercus* for Christian office-holders should be mentioned. In a period in which Christians had come to use the specifically cultic title *hiercus* to refer to deacons, presbyters and bishops, *hiercus* could have taken on the general meaning of "religious functionary." Thus, *hiericus* may reflect Christian, and not Jewish, usage. A modern parallel would be the use of "Islamic priest" to describe a *mullah*, which reflects the religious background of Western journalists, rather than Islamic usage. The position of *hiericus*, i.e., first in the list, could support this interpretation: the authors first employ the term which they consider to be the general term for "religious functionary," and then proceed to the specific titles of synagogue office known to them.

In support of the second explanation, one must note that the Christian authors had a deep enough knowledge of synagogue organization to employ two terms not in use in the Christian church: *archisynagogi* and *patres synagogue*, although *archisynagogos* would have been known to them from the New Testament. Further, the imperial court writers would certainly not have had an interest in liberating more persons than necessary from the corporal duties. Their interest would rather have been to limit the liberation to those persons who were clearly synagogue functionaries.

It is difficult to decide which is the better explanation, particularly in the light of the fact that the term *hiericus*, as applied to Jews, occurs only once in the Theodosian Code. Although the second explanation is probably more convincing, it seems more prudent simply to let the two explanations both stand as good possibilities.

Evidence for special recognition of priests in non-temple worship services can be found at Qumran, where priests, together with the elders or the Levites and the elders, are commanded to sit in front (1 QS 6:8; 1QM 13:1). One must note, however, that the people of Qumran probably viewed their worship service as a substitute temple service, while it is not clear that synagogue congregants did. Further, according to the Manual of Discipline, there are to be three priests in the Council of the Community (1 QS 8:1). The Damascus Document ordains that of the ten judges
of the community, four must be from the tribe of Levi and Aaron (CD 10:4-5).60

This scattered evidence for priests having roles in the synagogue or worship service as synagogue functionaries should not be misunderstood as evidence for priests as synagogue functionaries, but Philo, from the period before the destruction of the temple; the rabbinic references to the priestly blessing and the first Torah reader's being a priest, which can be dated back to at least the redaction of the Mishnah in the early third century; and the fourth-century Theodosian Code reference to Jewish priests in the context of synagogue officials (which may not be reliable, however) do show that several streams within Judaism seem to have given priests certain rights and roles within the non-temple worship service.61

Does any of this mean that Jewish women of priestly caste had special roles in the worship service? This is by no means immediately obvious. Our starting point was the three hierieia/ hierissa inscriptions. If male priests could, by virtue of their priesthood, exercise certain roles in the non-temple worship service, is it possible that female priests could likewise have performed certain functions in the worship service? There are certain hindrances to an acceptance of this proposition. For example, the male, i.e., exclusive, language of Num 6:23 ("Say to Aaron and his sons"); LXX: Λόγοι άνω τος υπό τον νόμον, was probably understood by all later exegetes to mean that men—but not women—of priestly caste are to recite the priestly blessing. The rabbis usually take exclusive biblical language to mean that women are in fact excluded.62 This tradition of interpretation should be taken much more seriously by those of today who argue that "sons" really includes "daughters" and "man" really includes "woman." Against the background of the exclusion of women where the bible uses male terminology, it is surprising to find a rabbinic example of the exact opposite: taking the biblical "son" (bÈn) in Deut 25:5 to mean "son or daughter." The context is the woman whose husband dies without a son and whose brother-in-law is therefore required to marry her in order "that his (i.e., the dead husband's) name not be blotted out of Israel" (Deut 25:6). The rabbis ruled that if the deceased husband had a daughter, then the brother-in-law was not required to marry the woman (b. B. Bat. 109a). Perhaps this inclusive tradition is an old one, for the LXX has sperma for bÈn, and to paidion for habbèqîr (Deut 25:5-6). In sum, it is likely that most streams of Judaism

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would have taken Num 6:23 ("sons of Aaron") to mean that only male priests should recite the priestly blessing, but the extension of "sons" to include "daughters" would not be a total anomaly in the history of Jewish exegesis.

Is it possible that priestly women could have been preferred readers of the Torah? Again, to most scholars of Judaism, this proposition sounds absurd, largely because of the general view that women were not allowed to read the Torah in the ancient synagogue at all. Can ancient sources shed any light on this question? An important passage is *Meg.* 4.11 (Zuck. 226):

> הרבי ע全日ר ל לעמוד שבעה, אفيدר אשה.writerow ספל.
> אתר רבני הולך ע全日ר לㅁבעה, אפיפא אשה, ערפיא ספל.

Everyone can be counted in the minyan of the seven (who read the Torah in the worship service), even a woman, even a minor, but one does not bring a woman up to read to the congregation.

The Babylonian Talmud (*Meg.* 23a) has:

> תאני רבני הולך ע全日ר למעבש, אספר אשה, אולימ אפיפא,המעבש.
> אשה לא תקרא בחרותфесс,עפיפוא זבורה.

Our rabbis taught: Everyone can be counted in the minyan of the seven, even a minor, even a woman; but the sages said: A woman does not read from the Torah due to the honor of the congregation.

It is clear that these texts forbid women from reading the Torah to the congregation. The enigma is that if they are clearly forbidden to read, why are women included in the quorum of the seven in the first place? Minors, who are also included, are in fact allowed to read (see *m. Meg.* 4:6), a practice which later receded with the rise of the bar-mitzvah. Why are women included here at all? Ismar Elbogen suggests that women were originally allowed to read, but that by the Tannaitic period, they were already excluded. This would mean that the rabbinic inclusion of women in the quorum of the seven attests to a more ancient tradition, later suppressed, according to which women were allowed to read from the Torah in public.

Why the Babylonian Talmud gives the "honor of the congregation" as a reason for not allowing women to read is unclear. A possible parallel case could be a woman, a slave or a minor reading the Egyptian Hallel (Pss 113-118) to a man who is not able to read or to recite it from memory himself. The Mishnah ordains that such a man should repeat it after the woman,
the slave or the minor reading it, but curses be upon him
(m. Sukk. 3:10)! The shame of having a member of one of these
groups read to an illiterate, Jewish, adult male was apparently
great in the eyes of the rabbis. What m. Sukk. 3:10 does show
is that it was not unknown in the rabbinic period for women to be
capable of reading scripture aloud.

Neither t. Meg. 4.11 nor m. Sukk. 3:10 can be dated more
specifically than to the Tannaitic period, which closed around
the first quarter of the third century. They are not parallel
passages, of course, for t. Meg. refers to women reading the
Torah in public and forbids it, while m. Sukk. 3:10 refers to
women reading the Hallel in private and grudgingly allows it.
The enigma of the inclusion of women in the minyan of the seven
cannot be definitively solved with the few hints available to us
in our sources, but their inclusion does make it impossible to
state that under no circumstances did women publicly read from
the Torah in the ancient synagogue. We must simply admit that we
do not know if women did or did not read. If we do not know
what the situation in Palestine and Babylonia was, how much less
do we know of synagogue worship in Egypt or in Rome, where Marin
and Gaudentia worshiped.

In conclusion, although the recitation by priestly women of
the priestly blessing seems unlikely in light of the explicit
"Aaron and his sons" in Num 6:22, it is not impossible that
certain communities could have interpreted this to mean "Aaron
and his children" and have asked both the priestly women and the
priestly men present to bless them. Further, although there is
no solid evidence for women having read the Torah publicly in the
synagogue service, it cannot be excluded, particularly for the
Greek-speaking congregations (about which we know next to
nothing), that they did. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that
one or more of the three women of our inscriptions were remem-
bered with the title "priest" because their priestly descent had
entitled them to certain rights and honors in the synagogue
service during their lifetime.

C. References to Male Priests in
Inscriptions and Papyri

Before attempting to come to a decision as to the likeli-
hood of the three possible interpretations of hierieia/hierissa, a
brief survey of hierieus in Jewish inscriptions and papyri is
necessary. From Rome there are four hierieus inscriptions, all