

CHAPTER VII

FURTHER BACKGROUND ISSUES RELATING TO WOMEN

LEADERS IN THE ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE

A. Women's Participation in Synagogue Worship Services

The lack of an adequate understanding of women's participation in the life of the ancient synagogue has hindered research on the Jewish inscriptions in which women bear titles. Even the following, very cursory survey of several salient points should shed light on the context from which they arose. The basis for all other participation is attendance at the synagogue services. Women's attendance at synagogue worship services is taken for granted in the ancient sources.¹ The New Testament gives several of the earliest attestations of this. In Luke 13:10-17, Jesus heals a woman who had been bent over for eighteen years. According to the evangelist, the framework of the miracle is a sabbath service: "Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath" (Luke 13:10).

The Acts of the Apostles also attest to women's presence at worship services. When Paul and Silas traveled to Philippi, they followed their usual custom of searching out the local synagogue (Acts 16:12b-14):

Ἦμεν δὲ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ πόλει διατρίβοντες ἡμέρας τινάς. τῇ τε ἡμέρᾳ τῶν σαββάτων ἐξήλθομεν ἔξω τῆς πόλεως παρὰ ποταμὸν οὗ ἐνομιζομεν προσευχὴν εἶναι, καὶ καθίσαντες ἐλάλοῦμεν ταῖς συνελθούσαις γυναῖξιν. καὶ τις γυνὴ ὀνόματι Λυδία, πορφυροπώλις πόλεως θυατείρων σεβομένη τὸν θεόν, ἤκουεν, ἣς ὁ κύριος διήνοιξεν τὴν καρδίαν προσέχειν τοῖς λαλουμένοις ὑπὸ τοῦ Παύλου.

We remained in this city for some days; and on the sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a synagogue (proseuchē); and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul.

There is a general tendency among scholars to assume that it is not an actual synagogue service which is meant, but rather some sort of outdoor prayer meeting. The reasons for the hesitancy to translate proseuchē as "synagogue" are: 1) the "we supposed" (hou enomizomen) of v. 13; 2) the use of proseuchē instead of

synagōgē, which is the usual term in Acts (Acts 6:9; 9:2; etc.); and 3) the fact that the congregants are women.² As to the first reason, it does not seem unusual that the missionaries would not know the site of the synagogue in a strange town. Secondly, the term proseuchē perhaps goes back to the sources of the author of Acts (the same term occurs immediately following in 16:16) or is perhaps a simple variant in the author's usage. It is in any case well-attested as meaning "synagogue."³ I believe that the real reason for the hesitancy is that the only congregants mentioned are women. One can see that this is a circular argument: on the assumption that women did not attend or only rarely attended synagogue services, a text which speaks of women attending services is taken as not referring to genuine synagogue worship. None of the three reasons is convincing, and this text is therefore a further attestation of women's presence at Jewish worship services. Another example is found in Acts 17:4, in which "not a few of the leading women" were persuaded by Paul's sermon in the synagogue of Thessalonica. Finally, Acts 18:26, "He [Apollōs] began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately," is an example of a Jewish woman not only attending the service, but also teaching in a synagogue context.

Rabbinic sources also speak of women participating in synagogue services. B. 'Abod. Zar. 38a-38b reads:

אשה קדירה על גבי כירה ובאה עובדת כוכבים
ומניסה עד שתבא מבית המרחץ או מבית הכנסת
ואינה חוששת.

[An Israelite] woman may set a pot on a stove and let a gentile woman then come and stir it pending her return from the bathhouse or the synagogue, and she need take no notice of it.

This saying is a *baraita* (i.e., Tannaitic). Just preceding these words, the text speaks of a male Israelite leaving a gentile man to watch his meat while he is in the synagogue or house of learning. Thus it is assumed that just as men ordinarily go to synagogue, so too do women ordinarily go to synagogue. A further relevant text is y. Ber. 9d.6-8 (cf. b. Soṭa 38a):

עיר שכולה כהנים נושאים את כפיהן. למי הן מברכין?
לאחיהן שבצפון לאחיהם שבדרום לאחיהם שבמזרח
לאחיהם שבמערב. ומי עונה אחריהן אמר? הנשים והטף.

In a town where all are priests they raise up their hands [to give the blessing]. Whom do they bless? Their brothers in the north, in the south, in the east and in the west. And who answers, "Amen," after them? The women and the children.

Again, the women's presence in the service is simply presupposed.⁴ Note that this text presupposes that only male priests give the priestly blessing. A story told of a woman who used to go each week to hear R. Me'ir (ca. 150) preach would be one more example of the way in which also the rabbinic sources take women's attendance at worship services to be an ordinary phenomenon (y. Sotā 16d.38-52; Lev. Rab. 9.9; cf. Deut. Rab. 5.15). Another story about a woman's regular attendance at synagogue services is also relevant here (b. Sotā 22a):

דההיא אלמנה דהואי בי כנישתא בשיבבוחה,
כל יומא הוא אחיא ומצלה בי מדרשיה דרבי יוחנן,
אמר לה, בחי! לא בית הכנסת בשיבבוחך.
אמרה ליה, רבי! ולא שכר פסיעות יש לי.

A certain widow had a synagogue in her neighborhood; yet she used to come daily to the school of R. Johanan and pray there. He said to her, "My daughter, is there not a synagogue in your neighborhood?" She answered him, "Rabbi, but have I not the reward for the steps!"

The issue here is not that the woman goes to the synagogue regularly, but rather that she walks quite a distance to attend services in a synagogue far from her home and merits reward for her extra steps. That she attends is not cause for surprise. The background of these sources is that, according to Tannaitic halakhah, women are obliged to pray (m. Ber. 3:3); prayer in the synagogue is one of the ways of fulfilling that obligation.

In the light of such sources, one can say with certainty that Jewish women attended synagogue services in the period of the Second Temple and of the Mishnah and the Talmud. It is difficult to understand how Goodenough could write with reference to the Juliana who had donated the mosaic in the synagogue at Naro in North Africa:

She herself could presumably not have attended the services in this sancta synagoga; but as with all daughters in Israel, her hope was in the maintenance of Jewish worship and life.⁵

B. Women as Donors to and of Synagogues

Anyone familiar with the workings of private institutions is acutely aware of the connection between the ability to give money and the capability of wielding influence. The boards of