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Article

Inscribing Authority: Female Title Bearers in Jewish Inscriptions

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Abstract: This paper investigates representations of gender in the material culture of the ancient synagogue. The pertinent data are numerous dedicatory and funerary inscriptions linking individual Jews, men and women, with titles seemingly associated with leadership in Late Antique synagogues (ca. 200–600 CE). Bernadette Brooten's influential 1982 monograph argued against the prevailing tendency to characterize these titles as indications of power, authority, and responsibility when associated with men but as meaningless flattery when applied to women. She suggests that synagogue titles denote power, authority and responsibility on all title bearers equally, both men and women. I question the continued utility of proffering female title-holders as enumerable examples of powerful women rescued from their forgotten place in history. Using theoretical insights developed by historians Elizabeth Clark and Gabrielle Spiegel, this paper will engage a comparative analysis with the work of Riet van Bremen and Saba Mahmood to develop new methods of conceptualizing women's authority in early Jewish communities. I propose that viewing women's synagogue titles as culturally constructed representations allows for a fruitful inquiry into how women's titles were used by male-dominated synagogue communities in their self-articulation and public presentation of Judaism.

Keywords: women; authority; synagogue; representation; inscriptions

1. Introduction

A third century CE mortuary inscription from Smyrna reads, "Rufina, a Jew, head of the synagogue (ἀρχισυνάγωγος), built this tomb for her freedmen and her slaves. None other has the right to bury a

body here. If, however, any one should dare to do so, he must pay 1,500 denarii into the holy treasury and 1,000 denarii to the Jewish people. A copy of this inscription has been deposited in the archives ([1], n. 43)." A fourth century CE marble mortuary plaque from Crete reads, "Sophia of Gortyn, elder (πρεσβυτέρα) and head of the synagogue (ἀρχισυναγώγισσα) of Kisamos, lies here. The memory of the righteous one forever. Amen."([2], p. 227). A Roman sarcophagus fragment of undetermined date reads, "Veturia Paula, taken to her eternal home, who lived 86 years, six months; a proselyte of sixteen years named Sara, mother of the synagogues (*mater synagogarum*) of Campus and Volumnius. In peace her sleep ([3], n. 577)."

This paper investigates representations of gender in the material culture of the ancient synagogue. The pertinent data are numerous dedicatory and funerary inscriptions linking individual diasporic Jews, men and women, with titles such as *archisynagogos* (head of the synagogue) and *pater/mater synagogae* (father/mother of the synagogue), and others, seemingly associated with synagogue leadership in antiquity (ca. 200 CE–600 CE). Bernadette Brooten's influential 1982 monograph argued against the prevailing tendency to characterize these titles as indications of power, authority, and responsibility when associated with men but as meaningless flattery when applied to women [4]. She suggests that synagogue titles denote power, authority and responsibility on all title bearers equally, both men and women.

Brooten's study was of paramount importance for bringing the phenomenon of female title bearers to prominence. Synagogue title inscriptions offer a rare example of material culture illuminating questions of gender and women's religious expression in the context of Late Antiquity's synagogues and as such merit continued and rigorous examination. Without disputing the importance of publishing newly discovered women's title inscriptions, scholarship on synagogue titles in general and female title bearers specifically is trapped in a pattern in which, to quote Clark, "we retrieve another forgotten woman and throw her into the historical mix [5]." Given the absence of progress interpreting these inscriptions over the past thirty years, a reconceptualized approach to the corpus as a whole is warranted. The pattern can be broken and progress renewed by the adoption of a new theoretical position from which to investigate synagogue titles and their female bearers. Building upon Brooten's work, I will demonstrate that viewing women's title inscriptions as culturally constructed representations allows for fruitful inquiry into how women's titles were used in male-dominated synagogue communities' self-articulation and public presentation of Judaism.

After presenting additional details about the inscriptions in question, I will offer a brief overview of the history of scholarship on synagogue titles. The paper continues with a short discussion of the challenges and opportunities posed to historians by post-modern critical theory and some of the theoretical solutions, devised by historians Elizabeth Clark and Gabrielle Spiegel, to meet them. A comparative analysis will follow, which uses the methods of Riet van Bremen and Saba Mahmood to juxtapose women's positions in synagogue communities with those in Greco-Roman civic administration and the Islamist piety movement, respectively. I will conclude with a discussion of Jewish communities' social and cultural locations in the Greco-Roman Diaspora and how those locations illuminate the purpose and significance of female synagogue title bearers.

2. Background

The inscriptions of Rufina, Sophia, and Veturia Paula, along with twenty additional inscriptions found throughout the Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity, commemorate women in the same or comparable terms as evinced for men, albeit in fewer numbers. The inscriptions' execution ranges from finely chiseled in marble to sloppily scrawled red paint on plaster, and their location varies from prominent display on a synagogue chancel screen to obscurity in the dimly lit passages of catacombs. In these ways, women's title inscriptions differ not at all from those of men, or indeed from the many hundreds of Jewish inscriptions that include no title at all. Yet the title inscriptions have generated interest disproportionate to their frequency in the corpus of Jewish epigraphy, due in large part to the paucity of information on the organization and administration of the synagogue institution in Late Antiquity. In this information vacuum, early scholars expanded the definitions of titles found in these inscriptions to cover all the logistical, liturgical, financial, spiritual, and social roles they perceived as necessary for the synagogue's successful operation in antiquity [6].

Although synagogue title inscriptions have been a topic of study since the nineteenth century, early scholars gave only passing interest to the fact that on rare occasions these titles were bestowed upon women. Whereas these scholars assumed practical responsibilities and obligations were incumbent upon male title bearers, they also assumed a complete male dominance of Judaism that would preclude the possibility of female leadership. These assumptions resulted both from an over-reliance on Rabbinic texts, which were uncritically assumed to constitute accurate reflections of pan-Jewish life in Late Antiquity, as well as comparison with later, better documented periods of Jewish history.

As a result of these assumptions, early scholarship typically explained away the significance of female title bearers in a variety of ways. Some scholars explained that female title bearers acquired their titles through marriage to the men with the same title, who performed the actual job. In the case of Rufina, the head of the synagogue in Smyrna, for example, Baron suggested that she was most likely the wife of the actual head of the synagogue [7], while Krauss said of female heads of synagogue in general that their titles "can certainly not mean that they were bestowed with the dignity of a head of the synagogue… it is rather the wives of heads of the synagogue who are meant ([8], p. 118)." Other scholars have discounted the importance of female title bearers by considering titles held by women to be honorary, in contrast to the functional nature of titles bestowed upon men. Thus, Rufina's title of head of the synagogue is interpreted by Schürer as "in the case of a woman, of course, just a title ([9], p. 2.435)," while Frey comments that "it seems difficult to admit that she [Rufina] actually exercised the functions of a head of the synagogue." ([10], p. 2.11).

Brooten disputes the nearly ubiquitous assumption among these early scholars that synagogue titles were functional when bestowed upon men, but honorary when given to women. A preponderance of evidence supports Brooten's rejection of the argument that women derived titles by virtue of marriage to real synagogue officials. Numerous examples of inscriptions exist in which female title bearers are named with no reference to their husbands. The examples of Rufina, Sophia, and Veturia Paula given above fall in this category. Further, there are examples of inscriptions in which women hold titles different from those of their husbands. One example comes from Malta, where a catacomb inscription commemorates "[X], *gerousiarch*, lover of the commandments and Eulogia, the elder (πρεσβυτήρα), his wife."([11], [12], p. 513, [13]). While the most conclusive evidence that women did not derive

titles from their husbands would be an example of a title-bearing woman married to a man with no title of his own, no such example is extant in the corpus. Nevertheless, sufficient evidence exists to support Brooten's conclusion that women did not receive titles by virtue of marriage. As for the argument that women's titles were honorary while men's were functional, Brooten concludes that there is no basis for this assumption, nor evidence to support it. She maintains instead that all synagogue titles should be viewed as functional, regardless of whether they were conferred upon men or women.

Just as scholars of early Judaism were eager for synagogue title inscriptions to fill the lacuna in knowledge of early synagogue administration, so too were feminist scholars delighted by Brooten's apparent discovery of women acting in leadership positions within early Jewish communities [14–17]. As new inscriptions have added to the corpus of female title bearers over the past thirty years, each publication presents its inscription as further confirmation that earlier assumptions of women's subordinate place in Judaism and Jewish society have been overturned [18]. As Rajak and Noy note, however, Brooten's otherwise revolutionary study neither questions the basis upon which the functional responsibilities of synagogue title bearers had been established, nor challenges the binary functional/honorary terminology of the debate [19–21]. Her assertion that both men's and women's titles were functional has no more solid basis or supporting evidence than did earlier scholars' assumptions that women's titles were honorary while men's were functional. There is simply too little information available to know what, if any, practical responsibilities or obligations were associated with the titles in question, regardless of the title bearer's gender. The continued enumeration of female title bearers brings us no closer to understanding how these and all synagogue titles functioned in early Jewish communities.

Examining historians' theoretical responses to post-structuralist critical theory's rejection of subject and history is one place to start developing a new theoretical approach to female title bearers and their inscriptions. I turn to theory in an effort to break the conversation out of its current stalemate. The theoretical models discussed here help distance data from interpretation by emphasizing the space between the text's words and their meaning. Instead of concluding from Sophia's inscription that she *was* an elder and head of the synagogue, the statement is amended: Sophia is *called* an elder and head of the synagogue in this inscription—a fact open to a variety of interpretations. The distinction might seem obvious or pedantic, but the token acknowledgement of the difference between reality and representation apparent in most studies of female title bearers justifies its emphasis here. Obviously these inscriptions are representations of women and not women themselves, but the questions asked of representations have yet to be asked of Jewish title inscriptions, as the following examples demonstrate.

3. Theoretical Considerations

Clark has reflected on the effects of literary criticism's linguistic turn on historians and their work on female subjects in particular [22]. She notes that whereas the initial "discovery" of respected, authoritative female figures in male-dominated religious roles was cause for celebration, the gradual realization of the representational nature of such figures has tempered expectations about their proving the empowerment of "real" women [5]. Clark gives the example of St. Macrina in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, whose prominent, positive depiction of his sister initially was lauded by feminist

historians. Scholars have become increasingly aware, however, of the distinction between the historical Macrina and the textual Macrina. The former was a real woman whose reality is lost to modern scholars, whereas the latter is a representational character created by Gregory for specific uses in his text [5,22]. This realization leads to more sobering conclusions regarding Macrina's presence and prominence in the text, but also to more credible understandings of women's roles in early Christianity. Clark's critique of Macrina scholarship in light of post-structuralism's desired elimination of the subject offers a way to rethink female title bearers. Rufina of Smyrna, Sophia of Gortyn, and Veturia Paula of Rome, like Macrina, are not the subjects they were once thought, but neither are they wholly gone. As representational subjects, female title bearers can illuminate the ways in which ancient synagogues used gender in their public presentations of leadership.

In response to post-structuralism's attempted dissolution of history into textuality, Gabrielle Spiegel has formulated a stance by which literary text and historical context remain distinct but work in conjunction to create meaning [23]. She argues that by heeding a text's "social logic," due diligence is given both to its contextual and discursive dimensions as simultaneous product and agent of social construction [23]. Moreover, if the discursive power of a text is to be understood, it should be examined within a historical context which though distinct from the text itself simultaneously establishes its significance: "Historians must insist… on the importance of history itself as an active constituent of the elements which themselves constitute the text ([23] p. 83–84)." The theoretical relationship between history and text articulated by Spiegel offers a corrective to the current practice of reading synagogue title inscriptions as neutral records of historical fact. Indeed, a robust skepticism toward archaeological and epigraphic sources is particularly important, as these sources are often heralded as straightforward and unequivocal in their depiction of "real" women in contrast to more bias-prone literary sources [15]. Determining the "social logic" of synagogue title inscriptions would involve renewed emphasis on the historical context of Jewish Diaspora communities as the social location reflected in and generative of these titles.

Repositioning the theoretical stance from which to view synagogue title inscriptions is the first step in moving the conversation in a productive direction. The insights developed by Clark and Spiegel in response to post-structuralist challenges to subject and history offer three new positions from which to think about title bearers. First, the subjects of inquiry are, of necessity, representations rather than real people. This is not to say that Rufina of Smyrna, for example, did not exist, but rather that the title inscription from which we know her is a contextually specific representation of Rufina as head of the synagogue. Second, title inscriptions participate in the construction of social meanings at the same time they purport to reflect those meanings. Again using Rufina as an example, her title inscription contributes to what it means to be a head of synagogue even as it describes Rufina. Third, the meaning of a synagogue title is not fixed, but fluid and signified through the discursive exchange between text and historical context. For example, both Rufina and a female, possibly an infant, from Cappadocia bear the title head of synagogue ([1], n. 255, [13,24]). The social logic of these texts would suggest that the title's meaning is sufficiently fluid to allow both individuals to be heads of the synagogue without necessarily implying that they were heads of the synagogue in the same way. The significance of the term is mediated by each context in which it is invoked.

4. Comparative Analysis

Having established a new theoretical perspective for the study of synagogue title inscriptions, this paper offers two methodological lenses through which to view and reflect on the import of women as title bearers. The following comparative analyses do not aim to essentialize the social position of women in ancient synagogues, Greco-Roman civil society, and Islamist movements, but rather the opposite: to reveal the essentialization of women's aspiration for power and autonomy that undergirds much of women's historiography. Challenging this essentialism will allow more contextually credible constructions of women's social locations.

Beginning in the Hellenistic period (ca. 150 BCE), the number of women represented in public inscriptions as holding civic offices increases, particularly in Asia Minor [25]. Many scholars interpret this numerical increase in female civic title bearers as indicative of women's enhanced influence and autonomy [26,27]. Particular interest is devoted to women credited with financing major events or monuments from their own monetary resources and without reference to a male relative: situations Paul Trebilco and others describe using the phrase "in her own right [28,29]." The significance of action "in her own right" rests on its belying Roman legal and literary evidence for women's continued subordination to male authority: the former requires male authorization for women's legal and financial transactions, at least in some cases, while the latter participates in the commonplace trope of women as the weaker sex [29]. Once again we see inscriptions upheld as straightforward, unbiased reflections of reality, which contradict male manufactured texts that obscure women's real life enhanced status [30].

Riet van Bremen has challenged two facets of current scholars' methodological approaches to Greco-Roman civic inscriptions: first, that quantity begets quality; second, that action "in her own right" constitutes a standard by which status or authority could be measured in the ancient world [31]. On the first point, van Bremen notes that the enumeration of women with titles is offered frequently as evidence for significance: "that by showing *quantity…* we are somehow able to make a positive *qualitative* point: 'therefore women must have been prominent', or some such statement ([25], p. 43)." In studies adopting this method, the link between quantity and quality is seemingly self-evident, as no explicit connection is drawn [28,29]. Women's civic title inscriptions are a small percentage of the overall corpus, which does not make them insignificant, but does make an argument based on quantity suspect. On the second point, van Bremen observes that while independence is a modern criterion for assessing status and authority, it is anachronistic when applied to antiquity: "we need to understand the status, the roles and the civic activities of women within the context of the families to which they belonged. In other words, not 'independence from' but its diametrical opposite 'belonging to' is the criterion we should be applying when measuring status and power ([25], p. 45)." Van Bremen's own approach, therefore, eschews both quantitative reasoning and the valuation of independence in favor of analyzing the social and familial contexts of specific titled women and drawing conclusions from those analyses. The following example illustrates this difference.

Plancia Magna of Perge, high priestess of the imperial cult and holder of other offices and liturgies, was responsible for funding the construction of a large gate complex in the city. Although married to a prominent senator from the family Iulii Cornuti, her husband is not mentioned in any of the dedicatory inscriptions from the gate complex. Is this an example of a woman acting "in her own right?" Van

Bremen suggests rather that Plancia is acting as the local representative of her biological family. Her father and brother had senatorial careers in Rome, and so it fell to Plancia to represent the Plancii in their home-city of Perge [32]. In Roman society's reciprocity system, her civic contributions are necessary insomuch as they reflect and strengthen her family's position as one of the first families of the city: as Seth Schwartz points out, a benefactor who ceases to support his (or her) city is no longer its benefactor ([33], p. 9). Such a conclusion does not detract from the significance of these responsibilities falling to Plancia. Instead, Plancia's actions are situated in the more culturally credible context of her family's civic responsibilities to the city of Perge. Ultimately, van Bremen's analysis of gender representation in Greco-Roman civic inscriptions reveals complicated networks of familial and community interests that influenced the bestowal of titles to women, always to the benefit of said family and community rather than the individual title bearer.

In a recent monograph, Seth Schwartz explored the question of how Jewish communities reacted and adapted to Roman social systems founded on concepts of reciprocal exchange, given, as he notes, that the Hebrew Bible prioritizes solidarity over reciprocity in intra-human relationships ([33], pp. 25–33). Most relevant here is his exploration of patronage, benefaction, and honor in the Palestinian Talmud. Great discomfort is evinced on the part of the rabbis towards Jewish religious communities' reciprocation of benefaction through honor and memorialization, including but not limited to epigraphic attestation of community gratitude for financial donations. At the same time, however, the rabbis demonstrate the internalization of these foreign values through the relationship between sage and students as well as in their desire that the honorability of the Torah, and themselves by extension, be recognized in Rome ([33], pp. 118–165). This tension reveals two things. First, honor was held as a socially functional commodity, even among conservative Jewish circles deliberately resistant to Roman values. Second, Jewish epigraphic memorialization was recognized, even among those who disapproved of it, as functioning within a Roman style system of euergetism. Their disapproval implies their recognition that reciprocity has become part and parcel of the synagogue institution.

A consideration of the interests and influence of family and community on the choice of synagogue title recipients lends itself to a reevaluation of titled women and female donors as operating within specific familial and social contexts as well as within specifically Jewish responses to the pressure of the Greco-Roman patronage system. A dedicatory inscription from a synagogue at Tralles records the following inscription: "I, Capitolina, the most revered and pious one, having made the entire dais, made the revetment of the stairs in fulfillment of a vow for myself, [my] children, and [my] grandchildren. Blessings ([1], n. 27)." An inscription from Phocaea reads, "Tation, daughter of Straton, son of E(m)pedon, having erected the assembly hall and the enclosure of the open courtyard with her own funds, gave them as a gift to the Jews ([1], n. 36)." A dedicatory inscription from Myndos records the chancel screen donation, "[From Th]eopempte, head of the synagogue ([ἀρ]χισυν), and her son Eusebios ([1], n. 25)."

In these three examples, Jewish women, including one with a synagogue title, are credited with making financial contributions to their synagogue communities from their own monetary resources and without reference to a husband or other legal guardian. Earlier scholars considered these examples as evidence for Jewish women acting "in their own right" in the areas of office holding and financial contributions. In light of van Bremen's analysis, perhaps greater attention should be paid to the inclusion of Capitolina's, Tation's, and Theopempte's biological family members than to the absence

of their husbands. The emphasis on biological rather than marital relationships in these dedicatory inscriptions implies prioritizations of familial and community interests similar to those at work in Perge among the Plancii. The relative paucity of Jewish inscriptions as a whole in comparison to the Greco-Roman corpus makes van Bremen's type of large scale contextual analysis difficult for synagogue title inscriptions. Nevertheless, her methodological insight regarding the importance of familial context in assessing the meaning and significance of women's inscriptions should inform the study of female title bearers.

The positive valuation of action "in her own right" has its root in the discourse of feminist theory of the 1970s. A key area of focus is the workings of individual agency within the confines of a subordinating social or religious structure. Data are analyzed with the goal of detecting how women were able to subvert hegemonic cultural norms to serve their own interests and agendas [34]. This action is characteristic of what feminist scholar Saba Mahmood calls "positive freedom," which she describes as "the capacity to realize an autonomous will, one generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of 'universal reason' or 'self-interest', and hence unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition. In short… the capacity for self-mastery ([34], p. 11)." This positive notion of freedom often appears in feminist historiography (the *her-story* described by Joan Scott, for example) as the basis upon which specific instances of women's self-directed actions are uncovered [35]. Mahmood's work on women's participation in and support of Islamist movements exposes previously held assumptions regarding women's universal desire for individuality and autonomy. Her research reveals women asserting themselves within male-dominated power structures, but with the goal of supporting the very discursive strategies that normalize and reify their subordination ([34], pp. 4–5). This insight encourages a reconsideration of the conclusion that female title bearers accrued, or even sought to accrue, equal power, authority, and responsibility within the synagogue community.

In her study of female participation in the women's piety movement in Egypt, part of the larger Islamic Revival movement, Mahmood has had to contend with the paradoxical fact that large numbers of Muslim women actively and of their own volition support and strengthen cultural systems that reinforce their subordinate status. In the 1970s, Egyptian women began organizing neighborhood religious lessons focusing on the Qu'ran and other religious literature and the application of the tenets therein to everyday life, leading to an increase in veiling, in the production of religious media, and in rejection of perceived secularism and western culture in favor of the principles of Islamic piety and virtuous behavior ([34], p. 3). Mahmood notes that the seeming paradox of Egyptian women's support for subordinating structures can be resolved if we discard our assumptions about the universal valuation of positive freedom. Rather than locating agency in political and moral autonomy, as feminist scholarship tends to do, she suggests that, "the meaning of agency must be explored within the grammar of concepts within which it resides ([34], p. 34)." Mahmood's method, therefore, has clear similarities to van Bremen's, insomuch as it relies upon context to create meaning.

To illustrate her method of analysis, Mahmood offers the example of Abir, who joined the piety movement against the wishes of her husband, Jamal ([34], pp. 176–180). Abir's increasingly pious lifestyle included adopting the full body veil, performing routine religious observances, and attending religious lessons, as well as voicing objections to Jamal's use of alcohol and pornography, and his lax observation of religious rituals. In defying the wishes of her husband by participating in the piety movement, Abir was actually violating the very tenets the movement espoused. Her defiance was

successful for two reasons: first, because although Jamal did not support Abir's pious behaviors, he did at heart share the beliefs that undergirded them; second, because through the instruction Abir received from the piety movement, she had the upper hand in their arguments about proper Islamic conduct. Mahmood summarizes the situation, "Abir's ability to break from the norms of what it meant to be a dutiful wife were predicated upon her learning to perfect a tradition that accorded her a subordinate status to her husband ([34], p. 179)." While a traditional feminist reading might interpret Abir's behavior as a subversion of her patriarchal cultural norms through the pursuit of her own agenda, such a reading would not take into account the grammar of concepts with which Abir conceptualizes her actions. She does not, for example, defy Jamal's authority because she objects to it as such. Rather, she defies his impiety, exemplified both by his own behavior as well as his attempted restriction of her pious practices, using persistence and superior knowledge of virtuous conduct to achieve specific ends ([34], pp. 180; 187–188).

The methodological connection between analysis of the Egyptian women's piety movement and the study of women's synagogue inscriptions is not as immediately apparent as was the latter's relationship to Greco-Roman women's civic inscriptions. As discussed above, it is precisely the actions of title bearers that cannot be determined with any degree of certainty, and Mahmood's work is, at heart, about women's action. Although I cannot develop a detailed grammar of concepts to describe the actions of female title bearers in the way Mahmood can for the women of the piety movement, there are several ways in which her work can clarify the position of female title bearers. A preliminary benefit of embracing the idea of agency mediated by a grammar of concepts is abandoning terminology like "in her own right" in favor of terms derived from inscriptions themselves, such as Capitolina's description as "most revered and pious one," or Sophia of Gortyn's epithet "the righteous one." Although a discussion of the meanings of these qualities in these contexts is necessary, at least these terms originate in an ancient, rather than modern, conceptual world. Independent action is a modern value that should not be applied uncritically in ancient contexts. Moreover, following Mahmood's method in prioritizing "the ends" over "the means" would mitigate the scholarly tendency to analyze and to value women's title inscriptions as an end unto themselves. Insufficient attention has been paid to inscriptions' "afterlife": the ways in which titles continue to shape meanings and perceptions long after the demise of their bearers. By focusing on the ends to which women's titles inscriptions contributed, the conversation re-centers productively on how representations of female title bearers served specific purposes in the Jewish communities of Late Antiquity.

A disconnect remains, however, between Mahmood's conceptualization of agency, as embodied by Abir, and female title bearers, who I have insisted on discussing in terms of representation. A more direct connection can be made by combining Spiegel's concept of social logic, van Bremen's theory of familial context, and Mahmood's notion of agency, and applying these ideas to the subset of title inscriptions that fall in the category of dedications. For although female title bearers in dedicatory inscriptions remain representations, they differ from women memorialized in funerary inscriptions in one crucial way: they are *self*-representations.

5. Patronage, Family, and Self-Representation

The question of who commissioned the inscriptions in question has yet to be addressed. Like their Greco-Roman counterparts, a small percentage of Jewish funerary inscriptions name a commemorator in addition to the deceased in mortuary inscriptions [3,36,37]. For example, an inscription from the Vigna Randanini catacombs reads, "Here lies Simplicia, mother of the synagogue, who loved her husband … of the synagogue for his own spouse … " ([3], n. 251). Although incompletely preserved, the text indicates that Simplicia's husband commissioned her mortuary inscription and, by implication, that he chose to commemorate her as mother of the synagogue. The majority of funerary inscriptions featuring female title bearers, like the majority of funerary inscriptions more generally, do not indicate a commemorator. It is reasonable to suggest, however, that they were commissioned by family or community members, whose choice of how to represent the deceased is reflected in the inscriptions.

Three of the 24 extant inscriptions naming female title bearers are not funerary in nature, however, and are instead dedicatory inscriptions: Rufina and Theopempte, who have already been introduced, as well as Jael, who is commemorated as a προστάτης (benefactor) in the monumental inscription from Aphrodisias ([1], n. 14). As living financial supporters of the projects for which they were commemorated, it stands to reason that they had influence over *how* they were commemorated. Thus the inscriptions of Rufina, Theopempte, and Jael are self-representations: a subcategory of female title bearers that bridges the gap, at least momentarily, between representation and reality.

As noted above, financial donation was one area of synagogue leadership for which there is corroborative evidence that women participated, and, like their Greco-Roman counterparts, both male and female Jewish donors could expect to receive titles and other rewards for their generosity. Like Plancia Magna, all three women represent themselves as acting within a familial structure: Theopempte and Jael by making donations in association with their sons, and Rufina by acting on behalf of her financial dependents and their descendents [38]. Like Abir, all three women make use of the vocabularies available to them within their worlds' grammar of concepts, not to subvert the system or to challenge their place within it, but to reinforce that system to the advantage of their families.

Rufina represents herself as head of the synagogue at Smyrna. The actions she commemorates, however, are not related to synagogue activities. Instead, in the inscription Rufina represents herself as performing the office of a patron for her clients in a manner indistinguishable from normative Greco-Roman patronage practice [39]. In the context (or social logic) of this inscription, at least, the positioning of the title head of the synagogue alongside her name and self-identification as a Jew, and prior to the actual action commemorated by the inscription, reinforces the observation of Rajak and Noy that head of the synagogue was who Rufina was rather than what she did ([20], p. 89). The question remains: did Rufina exercise religious authority within her synagogue community?

6. Conclusions

However promising they appear, I would argue that title inscriptions are not helpful data for those asking questions about women's religious authority in early Jewish communities. Despite the suggestive and seemingly unambiguous implication that phrases such as "head of the synagogue" offer, these titles are surrounded by too many unknowns [40]. It is all too easy to envision the scenario

in which Theopempte, Jael, and all the rest played prominent, official, and authoritative roles within the synagogues of Late Antiquity. This is our scenario, however, and is predicated upon how we think women can and should think, act, feel, and be.

I suggest that Rufina's inscription, although with those of Theopempte and Jael, finds an appropriate grammar of concepts in Schwartz's location of the synagogue within the Roman patronage system. According to this interpretation, synagogue title holders—both men and women—are awarded office on the basis of their status and wealth, with the expectation that as office holders they will continue as financial benefactors of the synagogue, garnering honor, prestige, and influence in return for their largesse. Rufina functioned as a patron, not only of her synagogue, but also for a group of dependent individuals, the construction of whose tomb she commemorates. In exchange for her patronage, she would have received loyalty, support, enhanced status, greater influence, and honor. Whatever other implications her title held, being head of the synagogue contributed to Rufina's honorary status in the community of Smyrna. Likewise her inscription, designating her a Jew, an *archisynagogos*, and a patron, functioned simultaneously to create *and* to display her honored status.

Although Rufina's self-representation as head of the synagogue is insufficient to conclude that she exercised religious authority within the synagogue at Smyrna, this conclusion does not detract from her significance for improving our understanding of women's social positions in early Jewish communities. We can, for example, explore the social logic in each title inscription's representation of gender, and articulate a grammar of concepts appropriate to the familial and community contexts that both created and are defined by these inscriptions. This approach frees the study of synagogue inscriptions from its current unproductive pattern and encourages new conversations about text, context, history, representation, and construction of gender in Jewish communities.

Acknowledgments

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