

**An Introduction to Synagogues in Jewish Inscriptions**  
**from the Graeco-Roman World**

Laurence H. Kant

© 1992, Laurence H. Kant, All rights reserved

**NOT FOR CITATION OR QUOTATION WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION  
OF THE AUTHOR. THANK YOU.**

I plan here to introduce readers to the relevance of Greek and Latin inscriptions for the interpretation of early Jewish synagogues. Inscriptions (Gk. ἐπιγραφαί; Lat. tituli) generally refer to writing on relatively solid, durable materials, especially stone and metal, but also (for example) plaster, stucco, glass, and fired clay. For the most part, these materials comprise stationary objects: e.g. walls, floors, ceilings, columns, pillars, doors and doorjambs, chairs and tables, altars, herms, statues and statue bases, cippi and stelae, milestones, millstones, aqueducts, gravestones and grave markers, sarcophagi, as well as urns and ossuaries. Composers of epigraphic texts could chisel, hammer, drill, cut, employ compasses, etch, paint, stamp, use molds, or tessellate them (as in mosaics). The study of inscriptions is usually referred to as epigraphy.<sup>1</sup>

The inscriptions were themselves intended to be viewed for the then foreseeable long-term future in order to memorialize decrees, laws, donors, honorees, the deceased and their families, public and private associations (political, religious, social, or trade), and many others. Central to the function of inscriptions in antiquity was the sense of permanence (and even survivability) conveyed by them, and such a quality of perennality is also

---

1. For basic introductions to Greek inscriptions, see G. Klaffenbach, Griechische Epigraphik; A. G. Woodhead, The Study of Greek Inscriptions (with caution); and G. Pfohl, Das Studium der griechischen Epigraphik (though it does not survey all the basic elements). For basic introductions to Latin inscriptions, see A. E. Gordon, Illustrated Introduction to Latin Epigraphy; I. C. Limentani, Epigrafia latina; E. Meyer, Einführung in die lateinische Epigraphik; and G. Susini, The Roman Stonecutter. Especially useful for surveys of individual inscriptions (with photographs) are M. Guarducci, Epigrafia greca for Greek inscriptions (though her interpretations are often idiosyncratic) and A. E. Gordon, ibid., for Latin inscriptions. These all have more detailed bibliography on various epigraphic issues only briefly alluded to here. A very interesting discussion of inscriptions from the professional point of view of epigraphers is I. di Stefano Manzella, Mestiere di epigrafista. For proper editing of inscriptions, still fundamental is S. Dow, Conventions in Editing.

important to scholars for an understanding of Jewish inscriptions which mention synagogues.

According to scholarly convention, coin inscriptions are usually studied under the category of numismatics. Writing on jewelry, clothing, amphorae, and other miscellaneous items are sometimes studied under the category of epigraphy, but customarily not. As a rule, inscriptions are specifically distinguished from texts found on papyrus or parchment, on which letters are handwritten. These objects, among which papyri are especially important for an understanding of synagogues,<sup>2</sup> will therefore not be considered here.

Although it is very difficult to make precise distinctions, there were clearly several stages in the creation of an inscription. As they stand now, epigraphic monuments represent only the final stage. Initially, an inscription was commissioned by various groups, councils, families, or individuals. Probably using style manuals, and likely with the input of those commissioning the monuments, secretaries and scribes next seem to have had a text drafted onto papyrus and wood, at which point, if it were particularly important or of a public character, the inscription was filed in the archives of cities, associations, or business enterprises.

At the point that the monument itself was prepared, various workshops became involved, including those of stonemasons, painters, mosaicists, and brick stampers. In the case of stone, the stone was hewn and polished; structural elements and other ornamentation were added as necessary; guidelines could be incised or painted for proper layout and alignment of letters; letters could be drawn with chalk, charcoal, or paint; they could be traced with a point; and finally the letters could be carved.

It is crucial to know that certain genres, couched in formulaic language and based on the practice of the great cultural centers, helped to determine the content of inscriptions,

---

2. The most significant collection of papyri related to synagogues is V. A. Tcherikover, Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum.

including Jewish inscriptions. Through the conquests of Alexander the Great, and later of Roman commanders, Greek and Latin inscriptional forms spread beyond Greece, Italy, and western Anatolia to central Asia, the Near East, Egypt and Cyrenaica, north Africa, Spain, the Balkans, and central and northern Europe.

Particularly relevant for the study of early Jewish synagogues are the following epigraphic genres: 1) decrees; 2) lists and catalogues; 3) dedications; 4) manumission inscriptions; and 5) funerary inscriptions. In terms of typical formal elements, these are no different from genres used by non-Jews in the Graeco-Roman world.

Most inscriptions related to synagogues indicate that they are Jewish by referring to individuals as Jewish or as Jews,<sup>3</sup> by making reference to Jewish places of worship, or by mentioning the Jewish community. Also important is the location of a particular inscriptions in what can be identified as a synagogue. Funerary inscriptions identify themselves as Jewish by reference to names that were used almost exclusively by Jews (e.g. Iouda, Ananias, Baruch), by reference to community offices that are indubitably Jewish, by displaying Jewish symbols (menorah, shofar, lulab, etrog, Torah ark, Torah scrolls), or by location in a cemetery that is definitively identifiable as Jewish.

For a collection of germane Jewish inscriptions, still fundamental is the 1967 corpus of Baruch Lifshitz, Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives, which gathers synagogue dedicatory inscriptions. Yet, inscriptions have been discovered since the date of this publication, and there are also pertinent inscriptions that do not fall into the dedicatory genre. Although it is in the process of being superseded, one should still examine Jean-Baptiste Frey's two-volume corpus of ancient Jewish inscriptions, Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum, especially for Greece, the Balkans, Anatolia, the Bosphorus Kingdom, Mesopotamia, Syria, and north Africa. Despite the impressive diligence in establishing a

---

3. Usually Gk. *Ιουδαίος/Ιουδαία/Ιουδαίοι*; Lat. *Iudaeus/Iudaea*. Less frequently *Ιουδαϊκός/Ιουδαϊκή; Εβραϊός/Εβραία/Εβραίοι*. Discuss Kraemer, etc.

corpus of this extent, it is important to be aware that Frey makes numerous editorial errors, uses problematic editorial conventions, and omits some significant items. Baruch Lifshitz improves on volume one of the corpus, by correcting mistakes, providing useful commentary, and adding some inscriptions that were previously left out. Volume two of Frey's corpus only includes inscriptions through 1939, and it has not been reedited as a whole. The Cambridge Divinity Faculty Jewish Inscriptions Project has contributed to remedying this situation by publishing corpora of inscriptions from Egypt and western Europe.<sup>4</sup> They include most relevant inscriptions, give substantial information on evidence for Judaism in various sites, furnish indexes that are extraordinarily useful, and provide excellent bibliographies, with commentary focussing primarily on the relation of the epigraphic texts to the Bible, ancient Jewish literature, and each other.<sup>5</sup> While this project is invaluable and an enormous improvement, still required is a complete reexamination of every inscription (many of which have never been examined with sufficient attention)—including personal visual inspection of the actual objects themselves, rephotographing, and consultation of squeezes—and, after that, a reedition of each inscription.

Many pertinent inscriptions are to be found in locationally based collections or in studies of individual inscriptions, such as the following (almost all of which supersede Frey):<sup>6</sup> Philippe Bruneau, “Les Israélites de Délos et la juiverie délienne” (1982); Louis Robert, Nouvelles inscriptions de Sardes (1964); Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum, Jews and God-Fearers at Aphrodisias (1987); Lea Roth-Gerson, The Greek Inscriptions from the Synagogues in Eretz-Israel (1987, for synagogue dedications); William Horbury and David Noy, Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt (1992);<sup>7</sup> Gert Lüderitz, Corpus jüdischer

---

4. See the books of W. Horbury and D. Noy below.

5. The Graeco-Roman context tends to receive less attention, which is unfortunate, given that Jewish inscriptions follow Graeco-Roman genre models.

6. The exception is H. Leon, The Jews of Ancient Rome, which should be used for Roman Jewish inscriptions in conjunction with B. Lifshitz's 1975 “Prolegomenon” to vol. 1 of Frey's Corpus. A volume on these inscrip-

Zeugnisse aus der Cyrenaika (1983); Yann le Bohec, “Inscriptions juives et judaïsantes de l’Afrique romaine” (1981); Harry J. Leon, The Jews of Ancient Rome (1960, for the most extensive collection of funerary inscriptions mentioning synagogues); and David Noy, Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe, vol. 1, Italy Excluding the City of Rome, Spain and Gaul (1993). Since Jewish inscriptions from Asia Minor (western Anatolia) can be particularly difficult to locate (even with Frey), the following publication proves very helpful, although it does not intend to be a corpus of inscriptions or to be complete: Paul Trebilco, Jewish Communities of Asia Minor (1991).

Of course there are in addition other studies of individual inscriptions and groups of inscriptions, to which I refer here as necessary. Also noteworthy is a collection of synagogue inscriptions pertaining to women by Bernadette J. Brooten, Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue (1982). For a discussion of Jewish inscriptions in general, including material related to synagogues, my own article might prove useful: “Jewish Inscriptions in Greek and Latin” (1987).<sup>8</sup>

In order to find inscriptions not in the above-mentioned publications and in order to locate items published in a particular year, it is necessary to consult the following sources: Supplementum epigraphicum graecum, which is presently the best source, providing both full texts, article summaries, and commentary;<sup>9</sup> Bulletin épigraphique through 1984 (published annually in Revue des études grecques), which provides references to relevant Greek Jewish inscriptions and often offers substantial critical commentary;<sup>10</sup> and L’année épigraphique (published separately) for Latin inscriptions.<sup>11</sup>

---

tions is also expected from the Jewish inscriptions project at Cambridge.

7. Superseding both Frey and the later collection of David M. Lewis, “Jewish Inscriptions of Egypt,” in V. A. Tcherikover, et al., Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum 3, Appendix 1, pp. 138-66.
8. See also P. W. van der Horst, Ancient Jewish Epitaphs (1991), although its focus is on funerary inscriptions.
9. Currently edited by H. W. Pleket and R. S. Stroud. Check in the index under “Jew” or “Jews.”
10. Since 1987 (there are no reviews for 1985-86) this annual review of inscriptions has not been as useful for the study of Jewish inscriptions as when edited by J. Robert and L. Robert from 1937-84; see the discussion of the new Bulletin épigraphique by Philippe Gauthier in Revue des études grecques 99 (1986): 117-18 (“Bulletin epigraphique”). Through 1984 check in the Bulletin under the sub-heading, “Inscriptions gréco-

In all five of these instances, Jews essentially follow the previously set formulaic patterns. In decretal inscriptions from Berenice (Benghazi) in Cyrenaica (Libya), two first century BCE decrees pronounced by the Jewish community (*πολιτευμα*) in honor of one Jewish individual (Decimus Valerius Dionysius) and one non-Jewish Roman official (Marcus Tittius of the Aemilian gens) use the standard decretal verb in the aorist, “have resolved” (*εδοξε*), followed by the dative “to the resolvers” (who are the archons and politeuma of the Berenican Jews). In addition, the honoree is given the standard Graeco-Roman awards of praise and periodic crowning with an olive branch and wool ribbon (either himself or the epigraphic stele itself), which was all to take place on important occasions (here at every gathering and on the first day of each month). Add Acmonia and others. SEG and BE.

While lists and catalogues were not often used by Jews, an important third century CE inscription from Aphrodisias (in Caria in western Turkey) lists the members of the executive board of the Jewish community (as well as god-fearers), who contributed to the establishment of some kind of building or institution (perhaps a foundation for those in need, a burial society, or a soup-kitchen). Charitable donations of this sort were common in Graeco-Roman associations.

As to the third category, many Jewish inscriptions concern the construction of synagogues or parts of synagogues—a feature which exemplifies the Graeco-Roman practice of attaching inscriptions to religious buildings and of recording the beneficence of those who contributed to their construction, maintenance, and adornment. In addition, they are frequently dedicated to their ultimate religious benefactor—God—in a similar

---

juives.”

11. Through 1961, *L'année épigraphique* can be found in *Revue archéologique* under the title, “Revue des publications épigraphiques,” as well as in separate volumes; after 1961 it is published only separately. It is currently edited by A. Chastagnol, A. Laronde, M. Le Glay, and P. Le Roux. Check index under heading, “Prêtres et choses religieuses,” and sub-heading, “Antiquités juives et chrétiennes.”

fashion to inscriptions in the Graeco-Roman world, which dedicate their buildings to various deities.

Geographically these inscriptions are found in Greece, Oescus in Lower Moesia, Olbia in Scythia, the Bosphorus Kingdom, Turkey (especially ancient Asia Minor), Syria, Israel, Cyprus, Egypt, Berenice in Cyrenaica, Hammam Lif (ancient Naro) in North Africa, Elche in Spain, as well as Ostia in Italy. Of these, the earliest are ones found in Delos in Greece (beginning of the first century BCE), Acmonia in Phrygia (end of the first century CE), Egypt and Cyrenaica (third century BCE to first century CE, giving specific dates and/or regnal periods), and possibly the inscription of Theodotus Vettinus in Jerusalem. The date of the latter is controversial. There are no internal or external dating clues, and it could date anywhere from the first century CE to the third century CE. There are also Samaritan synagogue inscriptions in Delos dating from the first century BCE to c. 250 CE, as well as one from Thessaloniki from the fourth century CE. I list the following important pre-Constantinian inscriptions: second century CE—Corinth in Argolis; second to third centuries CE—Sardis in Lydia; and Ostia in Italy; third century CE—Phocaea and Teos in Ionia; Tralles, Nysa and Hillarima in Caria; Amastris in Paphlagonia; Stobi in Paeonia; and Constantia-Salamis in Cyprus. Because in these cases there are generally no explicit dates, and dating must therefore rely on paleography, on archaeological context and on the uses of particular formulae and words in certain chronological periods, dating these inscriptions is a fragile procedure and usually subject to change. Others that are now undatable (or in rare cases dated later) could some day be placed in this category. Most of the remaining inscriptions are from the fourth century CE or later, including those found in Israel.

In regard to manumissions, four second to third century CE inscriptions from Panticapeum (Kertsch) in the Bosphorus Kingdom beside the Black Sea mention the freeing of slaves in individual synagogues under the auspices of the Jewish community.

Finally, for the most part Jewish funerary inscriptions follow Greek and Roman models. Hellenistic and early Roman imperial Jewish inscriptions from Teucheira (Tocra) in Cyrenaica and Leontopolis in lower Egypt do not generally mention synagogues, but include features that are characteristic of the period (especially for the particular regions): in the case of Teucheira, mention of the name and father of the deceased, date, and age of death; and, in the case of Leontopolis, references to the tragic deaths of children. From a later period (for the most part, second to third centuries CE), Jewish inscriptions from the city of Rome include even more details, most of which are common in Roman imperial inscriptions and all of which typify the emphasis on biographical detail found in the Roman period: e.g. family relations, age of death (sometimes including months and days), place of origin, occupation, excellence of character, or a combination of these.

On the other hand, many of these latter inscriptions (as well as other Jewish funerary inscriptions in the Mediterranean basin area) also make reference to membership in particular synagogues and to offices held in those synagogues. This is different from other Graeco-Latin funerary inscriptions. For example, a glance through the corpora of Greek and Latin funerary inscriptions from the city of Rome reveals that pagan inscriptions do not mention cultic affiliation and/or cultic offices held with the same frequency found in Roman Jewish inscriptions. In this regard, Jewish funerary inscriptions are much more similar to Roman funerary inscriptions that record the deaths of wealthy, aristocratic individuals, by referring to (among other things) the political offices held by them. Religious titles may also be included. But Jewish inscriptions from Rome do not solely include this lofty stratum of society, and the mention of these synagogues might therefore suggest a somewhat different sense of community than that revealed by most pagan inscriptions.



In a sense therefore funerary inscriptions indicate the complex fashion in which most Jews defined themselves in the Graeco-Roman world. While they usually saw themselves as a part of Graeco-Roman culture and functioned within it, they also viewed their community as one that was to some extent separate and different. In addition to the mention of synagogues, this is indicated in Roman epitaphs by the repeated use of the distinctive phrase, “in peace be your sleep,” and by the occasional references to observance of the law, however one might interpret the meaning of “law” in these contexts. The inscription of Regina is a particularly illustrative example of devotion to the law (CII 476). The very use of catacomb architecture for burial purposes, which was a unique phenomenon in antiquity prior to Christianity, suggests a desire to bury large numbers of individuals of the same group together in one place (sometimes with large concentrations of individuals from the same synagogue). Moreover, the numbers of the deceased in Jewish catacombs are generally much larger than those found in pagan tombs and those found even in the columbaria of funerary clubs, especially considering that catacombs contain sizable spaces for bodies, and not tiny urns for ashes. All this suggests a group that is more cohesive than others in the Graeco-Roman world.

But this reflects the case in the city of Rome between the second and the fourth centuries CE. I would like now to explore the situation at an earlier period and then return to the Roman materials. From the third century BCE to the second century CE, three Greek terms are used that are crucial for the interpretation of synagogues: *πολιτευμα*; *συναγωγη*; and *προσευχη*.

The word *πολιτευμα* is used in two inscriptions from Berenice in Cyrenaica, both of which refer to the “politeuma of the Jews in Berenice.” Based on what Josephus has to say about the Jews in Alexandria and in Cyrene, it would seem that a politeuma referred to the

Jewish community as a political unit, to which the Hellenistic kings and early Roman imperial political leaders gave some degree of autonomy in the running of their affairs and probably in their capacity to direct contributions to the Jerusalem Temple. In these inscriptions, the body politic, along with its leaders—the “archons” (whom Philo describes as instructing Jews in the proseuchai)—seems to have been responsible for the honoring of those who had financially aided the Jewish community or who had acted strategically on its behalf. Evidently the Jewish community held its meetings, and probably worshipped, in what the Berenican inscription calls an “amphitheatre,” which is by the way one of the earliest references to this kind of structure that later became such a standard feature in Roman architecture. Whether this is a non-Jewish building used by Jews or a Jewish building, is not clear. But the use of this type of public architectural form at an early date, as opposed to a domestic form (e.g. at Delos or Dura Europus) might suggest a different kind of gathering than that taking place in some early Jewish synagogues.

While a politeuma undoubtedly had religious functions (as did virtually all political bodies in the Graeco-Roman world), fundamentally it referred to a political organization that was recognized by Greeks and Romans as a largely self-governing unit with some kind of distinct legal status. What that legal status was, is difficult to say. Despite the claims of Josephus, and although many Jews became citizens of particular Greek cities and/or became Roman citizens, it probably does not imply equal citizenship and/or equal legal status for entire Jewish communities, such as those at Alexandria, Cyrene, and Antioch. This is especially true in light of Josephus’ own quotation of Strabo (AJ 14.7.2), by which he seems to contradict himself, since Strabo suggests a special status for Jews. But whatever this status was, it seems to have caused severe tensions between Jews and Greeks in the cities of Alexandria and Cyrene, probably because Greek citizens perceived Jews as

possessing some of the privileges of citizenship without all the obligations (presumably ones that were financial and religious). In any event, the existence of a politeuma reflects what I said above, namely that most Jews auctioned within, and yet maintained some separation from, the Graeco-Roman world in which they lived.

Unlike a politeuma, *συναγωγή* does not seem to have primarily referred to Jewish communities as a body politic that was legally recognized by the relevant governing authorities. Rather, the use of this term seems in part to reflect a situation in which the status of certain Jews had somehow altered, probably during the first century CE. For example, in Berenice by 56 CE, a dedicatory inscription indicates that the Jewish community no longer referred to itself as a politeuma, but rather as a synagogue. At the same time, the use of *συναγωγή* as a Jewish designation is found in texts from the first century CE (e.g. in Josephus, Philo, and New Testament literature), as well as in inscriptions from a somewhat later period. I can only speculate about what caused this sudden efflorescence in the first to second centuries CE. But I would suggest that one look in part in the direction of a change in status brought about by Roman imperial administration as opposed to Hellenistic, or Roman Republican, administration. Instead of viewing Jews as having a special legal status, perhaps Graeco-Roman society gradually began to view Jewish gatherings as more and more similar to other pagan cultic associations in the Graeco-Roman world. To some extent this might be confirmed by the fact that *συναγωγή* was a relatively common term used to describe the gatherings of pagan cultic associations. Try Poland book.

As a term in Jewish inscriptions from this early period, *συναγωγή* occurs much less frequently than *προσευχή*. In addition to the Berenican inscription, it is found in the Jerusalem inscription of Theodotus Vettinus (date uncertain) and in two manumission

inscriptions from the Bosphorus Kingdom (second century CE). Of these, only the Jerusalem inscription uses *συναγωγή* to indicate a building (which may not be too significant due to a possible late date), while the other three use it to indicate the Jewish community. In the two Bosphorus inscriptions, *συναγωγή* is contrasted with *προσευχή*, the former referring to a community and the latter to a building. In literary evidence, *συναγωγή* seems to have both senses (group and building). Probably in most cases, both meanings were present so that a building implied a community, and vice versa.

From the literary evidence (particularly the New Testament), one can gain a glimpse of what happened in synagogues: prayer, preaching, Bible reading, instruction, and legal exposition. This is confirmed by the Jerusalem inscription, which refers to the “teaching of the commandments” (*διδάχην εντολων*).

The most frequently used term in inscriptions prior to the second century CE is *προσευχή*, a noun that is not with certainty found outside of a Jewish (or Jewish influenced) context. It is related to the Gk. verb, *προσευχομαι*, which means to “pray” or to “offer a vow.” Although the noun commonly refers to prayer, with one exception,<sup>12</sup> it also acquired an almost exclusively locative connotation. Philo uses it to indicate the buildings in which Jews throughout the world received instruction in virtue, moral principles, and philosophy in general, by all of which he seems to mean Jewish law (e.g. Leg. ad G. 23.155 on the Jews of Rome). According to 1 Mac 3.46, Judah and his brothers went to a “place of prayer” (*τοπος προσευχης*) in Mizpah, where after ascetic preparations they consulted the “book of the law.” 3 Mac. 7.20 describes the dedication of a proseuche in Egypt. In most Jewish inscriptions, proseuche seems to have a locative sense: at Delos, in the Bosphorus Kingdom, and in Egypt. In one papyrus from Egypt (CPJ 1.138), a reference is made to the *συναγωγή* (“community”) in the proseuche (the building). According to a Latin funerary

inscription (not Jewish) from Rome (CII 531), the proseuche clearly refers to a building (presumably Jewish), which is located near a fruit market outside the pomerium.<sup>13</sup> For some Greek and Roman writers, proseuchai seem to have functioned as buildings around which beggars were said to congregate (Cleomedes, De Motu Circ. 2.1.91; Juvenal, Sat. 3.296; Artemidorus, Oneirocritica 3.53).

Some scholars have translated the locative *προσευχη* as “prayer house”, because of the literal meaning of the word. While there is no reason to doubt that prayer took place in these buildings, most of the literary evidence (especially Philo) suggests that proseuchai were also places in which instruction of some kind took place, presumably including Bible reading, as well as certainly ethical and legal instruction. Thus, the translation of *προσευχη* as “prayer house” is probably too narrow.

In addition, despite the protestations of some scholars that Jewish buildings of worship in the diaspora were not intended as substitutes for the Jerusalem temple until considerably after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, there is evidence that suggests otherwise. For example, the designation of the Jerusalem temple in LXX Is 56.7 (as well as Matt. 21.13; Mark 11.17; and Luke 19.46) as “house of prayer” (*οικος προσευχης*) would seem to suggest at least a semantic connection to those buildings in the diaspora called proseuchai. Furthermore, in numerous synagogue inscriptions (including the first century CE inscription from Acmonia in Phrygia), the word *οικος* is used—a word that often is employed in order to describe temple structures, both pagan ones and the Jerusalem temple. From an inscription in Egypt, one can see that one proseuche could be seen as equivalent to a pagan temple in at least one regard, the right of asylum (CII 1449, probably first century BCE). At the same time, the territory of synagogues and proseuchai is frequently described

---

12. . Lif. 35, Amastris in Paphlagonia.

as a “holy place” (*αγιος τοπος*) in Jewish inscriptions, while Philo once refers to it as a “sacred place” (*ιερος τοπος*, Quod Omnis 81). This is very similar to the way pagans viewed religious sanctuaries in the Graeco-Roman world. From another description of Philo (Leg. ad G. 132-135), there is also reason to think that some proseuchai were extremely elaborate and included numerous objects of tribute for the emperor (shields, golden crowns, stelae, and inscriptions). This certainly suggests something more than a prayer retreat, something that could be much closer to a temple. Interestingly, such objects of tribute were also found in the Jerusalem Temple. Likewise, Josephus describes the proseuche at Tiberias as a “huge building” (*μεγιστον οικημα*), capable of accommodating large crowds (Life 277).

As a result, it should not be difficult to comprehend why Josephus once refers to the magnificently decorated Jewish synagogue in Antioch as a temple (War 45). Procopius does much the same in the sixth century CE, when he refers to a synagogue in Boreion in Cyrenaica as a temple (De Aedific. 6.2.22). While Greeks and Romans may not have comprehended everything about synagogues, characteristics such as those outlined above would have seemed readily understandable to them.

In the second century CE and afterwards, the use of terminology reverses itself. Politeuma is not used at all to describe the Jewish community, while synagoge replaces proseuche as the term of choice for both the community of worship and the building in which it worshipped. Nowhere is synagoge found more frequently than in the Roman Jewish epitaphs. Here it apparently illustrates the decision of some Jews to identify themselves on their gravestones as members and/or officers of particular synagogues. Instead of defining themselves as simply Jewish or as members of a broader city-wide community, individuals in Rome evidently found their greatest sense of unity and pride in

local synagogues, whose members tended to bury themselves together in the same catacomb. This certainly reflects the powerful bonds that tied together some Jewish communities. Somewhat paradoxically, no matter what the actual differences, at the same time that synagoge was a term that was much more immediately understandable than proseuche for a Greek or Roman, Roman Jews used the term synagoge for the local synagogues that provided the vehicle for allowing Jews to maintain their cohesiveness and distinctiveness.

Now that I have just emphasized the maintenance of Jewish identity in Graeco-Roman culture by reference to synagogues, I would like to present for your consideration another side to the story. In an article on Jewish inscriptions, I have described how a sizable minority of Jews understood the divine realm in terms that can only be labeled as pagan (by which I mean a henotheistic or polytheistic view of things). For example, there are cases of Jews invoking the ancestral deities (e.g. dii manes, iunones, or *θεοι καταχθονιοι*) on their gravestones (perhaps parallel to a story in Josephus of Jews who swear by the shades of Alexander Janneus: AJ 13.416). There are cases of Jews who worship God in a sanctuary of Pan, of one Jew who sets up a monument at the command of Amphiaraus and Hygeia, and of Jews who sign oaths in manumissions to Juppiter, the Earth (Gaia), and the Sun (Helius). Several non-Jewish inscriptions (from the first century BCE to the third century CE) list the members of ephebic colleges and include individuals with Jewish names (Iesous, Eleazer twice, Iouda, as well as probably Irenaios, Iesoutos, and Simon). Ephebes were youths who were enrolled in the gymnasium of their *πολις*, which functioned as a preparatory school for those on their way to becoming citizens of Greek cities. It included instruction in the liberal arts, military training, as well as teaching of civic and religious responsibilities. Among other things this meant that some Jews were involved in pagan religious activities; one of the ephebic lists with Jewish names was dedicated to Hermes

and Heracles. Furthermore, political positions generally required a religious commitment of some sort. So when Jews are (for example) described as “guardians of the law” (*νομοφύλακες*) or as city “council members” (*βουλευται*), it may be presumed that some sort of religious gesture toward the patron deities of their cities was necessary.

There is no indication that these Jews were viewed as apostate or that they were trying to hide. In fact, since many of the diis manibus inscriptions are found in Roman Jewish catacombs, they seem to have been regarded as Jews in good standing. The Jewish city council members in Sardis actually contributed financially to improvements for the synagogue. In the above-mentioned Amphiarus inscription from Oropus, Moschion was proud to indicate openly that he was Jewish.

In the above cases, some have interpreted Gk. Ioudaia/Ioudaios and Lat. Iudaea/Iudaeus not as identificatory signs referring to the Jewish people in general, but rather as locative designations of persons who were inhabitants of the province of Judaea in Palestine. One might, thus, translate them not with the words, “Jew” or “Jewish,” but rather with the word, “Judaean.” In my opinion, such an argument would be ill-founded. First, in literary evidence, the words Ioudaia/Ioudaios refer most frequently to Jews. Exceptions are uncommon. Second, in the vast majority of Jewish (as well as non-Jewish) inscriptions, individuals refer much less frequently to their provincial origins than to their origins from a particular city. In general, persons in the Graeco-Roman world did not conceive their cultural identity in terms of provinces (which were for the most part imposed by the Romans from without), but rather in terms of cities (whose administrations could among other things offer citizenship to those who were qualified). Nor can I accept the extremely speculative view that Ioudaia/Ioudaios refers primarily to pagan adherents to Judaism. In almost all literary cases, where one finds Ioudaia/Ioudaios, these words simply designate a



Jewish person. In my opinion, these explanations are creative attempts at explaining evidence that is uncomfortable for a modern audience.

The questions I would put to this material are the following: Would these Jews have been considered members of synagogues? Would religious belief have had anything to do with membership? Furthermore, it would seem that some pagan sympathizers of Judaism (the so-called god-fearers) functioned as members or affiliates of some early Jewish synagogues. For example, in my opinion, the presence of both Jews and god-fearers on the Aphrodisias inscription suggests this. And one finds confirmation in a synagogue at Athens described in Acts 17.17, as well as probably in the synagogue at Panticapeum in the Bosphorus Kingdom (CII 683a).

The above-mentioned questions prompt further ones: What constituted membership in a Jewish or non-Jewish association in the Graeco-Roman world? Is membership even a proper term to describe affiliation with a synagogue? I ask all these questions, in part because membership (or participation) in a synagogue is clearly an area that has yet to be explored by scholars in sufficient detail. In addition, it opens the issue as to what extent Jews were willing to consider Graeco-Roman religious ideas in an institutional setting, which is something that I am presently examining. Moreover, it serves as a useful counterbalance to my emphasis on Jewish cohesiveness. And finally it brings me to my conclusion that the study of early Jewish synagogues inevitably leads to a consideration of what it meant to be Jewish in the Graeco-Roman world. Thank you very much.

---

13. . The proseuche mentioned in Acts 16.13, 16 is difficult to interpret.