

was to disqualify her from doing so [B]? Perhaps statement [A] was intended to allow a woman to read, but this permission was later withdrawn, as indicated in [B]. Statement [B] makes a categorical declaration denying this possibility, but in doing so it seems to imply that women were, in fact, called upon to read from the Torah at some time or place. It is at this point, however, that we reach a dead end. In the absence of any additional evidence, a firm determination remains elusive.

Did women contribute financially to the synagogue, and were they so recognized? Absolutely. Names of women donors are inscribed in numerous synagogues throughout the Empire, sometimes also noting what was donated—entire buildings, wall decorations, mosaics, porticos, ablution basins, etc. Interestingly, the extent of women’s involvement as donors varied from region to region. Whereas in Roman Palestine only 4–5% of women are mentioned in inscriptions as synagogue benefactors, nearly 30% of the donors cited in the Roman Diaspora were women. Since the Diaspora evidence is concentrated in Greece and Asia Minor (today’s Turkey), where pagan and Chris-

na, Crete, and Myndos—all in the Aegean and Asia Minor. In addition, a woman treasurer (*gizbarit*) is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 62a), but no details are offered regarding her specific duties or where she performed them. There is no reason to doubt that such titles referred to actual official positions and were not necessarily honorific titles, as was assumed by earlier scholars. In contrast, there is no evidence to suggest that women held defined communal positions in the First or Second Temple periods (except for such charismatic biblical figures as Miriam and Deborah). Once again, this phenomenon probably reflects the customs of the larger society impacting on local Jewish communities.

In what ways did Jewish synagogue practices differ from those of other religions or cultures? One significant difference relates to male-female seating arrangements. For the first seven centuries of the Common Era, women and men in both Palestine and the

tion in any synagogue, nor a single inscription noting such a separation. The absence of epigraphical evidence is significant, given the fact that many synagogue inscriptions of the time do, in fact, name various areas within the building. The majority of these edifices had only a single prayer hall where the congregation



Mosaic floor of a synagogue in Naro, Tunisia. The Latin inscription reads: “Thy servant... Juliana... at her expense paved with mosaic the holy...synagogue of Naro for her salvation....”

gathered, but no balcony. And even when a building did have one, there is no reason to assume that it served as a women’s gallery. It might have functioned as a space for meetings, court sessions, festive meals, study, or the *hazzan’s* (cantor’s) living quarters; according to rabbinic sources, the synagogue balcony was used for all these purposes.

Also notably absent from rabbinic sources is any discussion of separate seating for women. Four hundred or so traditions in rabbinic literature address the synagogue and its functions, and not one mentions a special women’s section. One rabbinic source does attest to the separation of men and women, but this was in the Jerusalem Temple, when a special balcony was constructed around the “Women’s Court” to separate the sexes during the frivolous Water Drawing Festival on Sukkot (Mishnah, Middot 2, 5; Tosefta, Sukkah 4,1). Notably, this stated exception to the rule makes it clear that on the other fifty-one weeks of the year, there was no such separation of men and women in the Temple precincts.

The sum of the evidence leaves little doubt that throughout Late Antiquity, whenever Jews gathered in the synagogue for ritual purposes, there were no gender distinctions in seating arrangements.

When did separate seating emerge? We know from Maimonides and the Cairo Genizah that this custom, in Egypt at least, was well in place by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as these sources explicitly note a separation or partition (*mehitzah*). Thus, at some point between

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tian women were also prominent benefactors, Jewish women in their communities may have been influenced by this prevalent regional practice.

Did women hold leadership positions in the synagogue? Yes. Synagogue inscriptions from different locales identify women with the titles *archisynagogos/archisynagogissa* (head of a synagogue), *archegissa* (leader), *presbytera* (elder), *mater* or *pateressa* (mother), and priestess. The titles vary depending on the region. For example, women are mentioned in the role of “archisynagogue” in only three synagogues—Smyr-

Diaspora sat together in the synagogue. This practice was in stark contrast to that of Roman society, which regularly instituted segregation in the public realm along class, ethnic, or gender lines; and that of the early church, which by and large separated men and women as well.

Given the long-held Orthodox insistence on separate seating, it’s surprising to hear that there was mixed seating in the ancient synagogue. The physical separation of men and women in the synagogue developed at a later time. There is no archaeological evidence from antiquity of a women’s sec-