

Mother / Father of the Synagogues and the Earliest Synagogue-Church Relations in Rome

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Introduction

This paper examines how the Jewish synagogues in Rome during the first century CE interacted with one another. I believe that this examination will provide insight into the relationship between the synagogues and the early church established in the city of Rome.

Traditional Assumption

I assume, like many others, that the Roman church began with the converts among ‘the Roman visitors’ (Acts 2.10) who came to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem. Some of these Jewish pilgrims from Rome were persuaded to embrace the conviction shared by the early disciples of Jesus through the apostle Peter’s speech. When they returned to Rome, they founded the church around 35 CE. Although Paul’s letter to the Romans suggests a later influx of Gentiles into the Roman church (Kümmel 1983: 270–71; cf. Hagner 2012: 521–22), it was primarily composed of ethnic Jews during its early developmental stage.

These Jewish converts to Christ — Jewish Christ-followers in the Roman church — naturally viewed other Jews in Rome as their primary target for missionary efforts. As they entered the Jewish synagogues to proclaim Jesus as Christ, the ensuing commotion became so significant that Emperor Claudius deemed it a source of social unrest. Consequently, in 49 CE, he issued a decree to banish Jews from the city of Rome. This seems to be a reasonable interpretation of what Suetonius (*Claudius* 25) reports when he writes, ‘Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he (Claudius) expelled them from the city’ (cf. Lampe 2003: 11–16). The proclamation of Jesus as *Christos* was likely misunderstood as disturbances instigated by *Chrestus*.

It has been suggested that the reason for the significant commotion is that the Jewish synagogues were unable to adequately guard against the infiltration of Christ-followers with missionary intentions. It is said that there was no central organization presiding over the synagogues in Rome, and communication between them was consequently not tight or frequent enough to address the external danger (Wiefel 1991: 91–92; Longenecker 2011: 72). This assumption is supported by evidence that no title of ἐθνάρχης (ethnarch) — the head of an ethnic group — has been found on epitaphs from the Jewish catacombs excavated in Rome. Schürer (1986: III.1.95–96) concludes that, unlike in the city of Alexandria, where the centralized political figure of ethnarch governed the Jewish community as a whole ‘as if he were the ruler of a free republic’ (*Ant.* 14.117–18), each synagogue in Rome functioned rather independently, like a collegium.

Aim

Counterarguments have been made in the past against the traditional assumption mentioned above. I will briefly explain some of these arguments below. However, the primary aim of this paper is to present a piece of evidence that has been overlooked in order to refute the assumption. This evidence is the existence of the titles ‘mother of the synagogues’ and ‘father of the synagogues’ on the epitaphs found in the Jewish catacombs in

Rome. It is also important to consider why the title of ἐθνάρχης is absent from the epitaphs, as this impacts the discussion on the relationship between the early church in Rome and the synagogues. Yet, the space allotted to the presenter only allows for a focus on the function of ‘father / mother of the synagogues’.

Past Counterarguments

a. Ben Heresh as the Inter-Synagogal Leadership: Juster, and later Krauss, argued for the existence of a central organization by pointing out that Rabbi Matthias Ben Heresh — the principal of the Rabbinic school in Rome — served as the authoritative leader of the Roman Jewry (Juster 1912: 418–418–24; Krauss 1922: 137–40; cf. Rocca 2017: 102, n.22). While it has been criticized that such a figure could not have been in a position to facilitate inter-synagogal communication (Frey 1931: 137), one cannot deny the possibility that a person with a strong connection to other rabbis in Rome could function as a central figure to help build meaningful relationships between synagogues in Rome.

b. Solidarity of Roman Synagogues: The organizational ability of the Roman synagogues should not be overlooked. Josephus reports that the Jews in Judaea sent fifty delegates to Rome in order to express their dissatisfaction with the puppet administration of Herod Archelaus before the Senate. On this occasion, ‘above eight thousand of the Jews that were at Rome’ joined the ambassadors (*Ant.* 17.300). Furthermore, he states, ‘the multitude (πλῆθος) of the Jews stood with the ambassadors’ (J.W. 2.81) before the council assembled by Caesar. M. William (1998: 224) understands πλῆθος as the entire community of the Jews in Rome. One cannot deny the possibility that Josephus exaggerated the number of the Roman Jewry to show support for the delegates from Judaea. Yet, the literary evidence seems to suggest that Jews belonging to many synagogues could unite for a shared purpose. The reference to the assembly of the Jews to hear the apostle Paul during his house arrest (Acts 28.17) may also imply that multiple synagogues communicated regularly with each other. Further, Cicero’s fear of the Jewish solidarity (multitudinem Iudaeorum) (Flac. 67) supports the existence of a centralized organization of the synagogues in Rome.

Synagogue Titles

Among the six catacombs excavated in Rome, three minor ones hardly provide valuable evidence. From the other three major catacombs of Monteverde, Via Nomentana, and Via Appia, 534 epitaphs have been discovered. They offer clues about how the synagogues in Rome functioned since the epitaphs often indicate the deceased person’s title within the synagogue.

These epitaphs usually begin with ‘Here lies (ἐνθάδε κείται) ...’ and end with ‘may his (her, your) sleep be in peace (ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ κοίμησις αὐτοῦ [αὐτῆς, σου])’. In between the opening and closing phrases, the deceased person is often described along with their synagogal title. For example, ‘Here lies Proklos, executive of the synagogue of the Tripolitans. Let him sleep in peace (Ἐνθάδε κεῖτε Προκλος ἄρχων συναγωγῆς Τριπολιτειῶν, ἐν εἰρήνῃ κοιμάσθω)’ (CII 390). Below are titles widely found in the catacombs (Leon 1960: 171–94).

- a. ἀρχισυνάγωγος: The head of the synagogue who oversees mainly the religious activities.
- b. ὑπηρέτης: The assistant to the head of the synagogue.
- c. ἄρχων: The executive who oversees non-religious activities such as maintenance of the building.

e. *γραμματεὺς*: The person who keeps the record of council meetings and other meetings.

Among these 534 epitaphs, eight include the title of ‘mother / father of the synagogue(s)’.

Father of the Synagogue(s) / Mother of the Synagogue(s)

Four examples of the epitaphs with the titles are shown below (see *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*). The translation follows closely that by H.J. Leon (1960: 263–346).

a. Here lies Asterias, **father of the synagogue**, pious, irreproachable. May your sleep be in peace

([ἐν]θάδε κίτε Ἀσστερία[ς] πατὴρ συναγωγῆς ὅσι[ος] ἄμειπτος αἰν ἱρήνη κοίμησίς σου) (CII 93).

b. Here lies [.....]ia Marcel[la], **[mother of the syna]gogue** of the Auguste[sians]. [M]emory. May her sleep be [i]n peace ([ἐν]θάδε κίτε [.....]ια Μαρκελλ[α μή]τηρ συνα[γωγῆς] Αὐγουστη[σίων μ]νησθη [ἐ]ν εἰρήνῃ [ῆ κοίμη]σις αὐτῆς) (CII 496).

c. Here lies Mniaseas, disciple of the sages and **father of the synagogues** (ἐνθάδε κίτε Μνιασεας μαθητῆς σοφῶν καὶ πατὴρ συναγωγίων) (CII 508).

d. Veturia Paulla F, consigned to her eternal home, who lived 86 yea[rs], 6 months, and proselyte of 16 yea[rs], named Sara, **mother of the synagogues** of Campus and Volumnius. May her sleep be in peace (Beturia Paulla F domi heterne quostituta que bixit an[nos] LXXXVI meses VI proselyta an[norum] XVI nomine Sara mater synagogarum Campi et Bolumni en irenae ai cymysis autis) (CII 523).

Functions of Mother / Father of the Synagogue(s)

a. Honorary or Practical?: Based on the patriarchal assumptions of Roman society, Krauss (1922: 166) asserts that ‘the synagogues did not give women such an authority (for practical functions)’. Schürer (1986: III.1.100–02) concurs that the titles are not practical but honorary. On the other hand, Broton (1982: 62–63) notes two epitaphs found in a Jewish catacomb in Venosa, Apulia, and concludes that ‘father (and mother) of the synagogue’ had practical functions. These epitaphs contain a peculiar expression of ‘father (of the synagogue) and patron of the city’ (CII 619c, d). She understands that while ‘patron of the city’ has practical civil functions, ‘father (of the synagogue)’ has practical religious functions.

The Theodosian Code seems to support the latter conclusion. It states, ‘We command that priests, heads of the synagogues, father of the synagogues, and all others who serve the synagogues shall be free from every compulsory service of a corporal nature’ (16.8.4). It seems unlikely that those given immunity from duties would include people with an honorary title (Broton 1982: 66).

b. ‘Father / Mother of Collegium’: Inscriptions show that ‘mother / father of the collegium’ managed philanthropic activities and contributions to the collegium. These titles usually follow the patron of the collegium in the list of collegium members (Cappelletti 2006: 8–9). Hemelrijk (2015: 259–60) evaluates the items contributed by the mothers of collegia, concluding that they did not necessarily belong to wealthy families from which honorary members of collegia were expected to come.

c. Early Christian Writers: Cyril of Alexandria (*Exposition of Psalms* vol.69, p.1045, l.21) is the only case that mentions ‘fathers of the synagogue’ among the early Christian writers. He equates them with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and other patriarchs and prophets. In this case, ‘the synagogue’ seems to signify the people of

Israel (cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets* vol.1, p.282, 1.23; Procopius, *Commentary on Genesis* chp.29, sec.2, 1.24). Cyril seems to have had concrete leaders of the people of Israel in mind when he used the term 'fathers'.

d. Formal / Informal Authority: While one cannot determine exactly what job description the father / mother of the synagogue(s) had, it seems probable that they were involved with their synagogues in practical ways with either or both formal and informal authority. They may not have been the primary organizational leader over ἀρχισυνάγωγος, but they were able to exert their influence upon the members of their synagogues.

Mother / Father of the Synagogues

In the discussion of the titles 'father / mother of the synagogue(s)', one aspect has been overlooked. That is, there were 'mother / father' who presided over multiple synagogues. Epitaphs, as mentioned above, show that Mniaseas was 'father' of unidentified plural synagogues (*CII* 508), and Veturia Paulla F. or Sarah was 'mother' of both the synagogue of Campus and the synagogue of Volumnius (*CII* 523).

It is possible that Mniaseas and Sarah functioned as 'father / mother of the synagogue' at one synagogue during one period and at another synagogue during another period. Alternatively, they may have assumed the position of 'mother / father' simultaneously at multiple synagogues. If the latter was the case, they are an example of Jews who presided over various synagogues to provide practical leadership among them. They naturally acted as central figures to ensure and encourage communication between synagogues. Even if the former was the case, one can easily imagine that they developed a network of synagogues and their members as they knew them in their roles as 'mother' or 'father'. Synagogues were able to connect with one another via these individuals.

Implication of the Titles

Therefore, the existence of the titles 'father of the synagogues' and 'mother of the synagogues' provides further evidence to counter the traditional assumption that the synagogues in Rome functioned independently with little communication among them. Thus, the belief that the lack of communication among the synagogues in Rome caused a significant effect on the infiltration of Christ-followers seems unconvincing. Rather, it is the tenacity of Christ-followers in their missionary endeavors that led to a considerable and continuous commotion among the Jews, prompting Emperor Claudius to take action. The experience of conversion at the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem inspired the converts to share their new conviction with other Jews in the synagogues of Rome.

One further consideration may be added. It is known that at least eight synagogues used the catacomb of Monteverde, while both the catacombs of Via Nomentana and Via Appia were occupied by at least two synagogues each. These catacombs served as meeting places for various synagogues. One may assume, then, that an organization comprising members from several synagogues was established to manage a catacomb (cf. Cappelletti 2006: 16). This may not represent the central organization overseeing all synagogues in Rome. However, it is reasonable to suggest that various forms of media existed to facilitate and encourage communication between the Jewish synagogues spread throughout the city of Rome.

Appendix: Other Examples of 'Mother / Father of the Synagogue'

CII 88: Here lies Annianus, child executive, son of Julianus, Father of the Synagogue of the Campesians, aged 8, 2 months. May his sleep be in peace (ἐνθάδε κεῖτε Ἀννιανὸς ἄρχων νήπιος υἱὸς Ἰουλιάνου πατρὸς συναγωγῆς Καμπησίων αἰτῶν ἢ μηνῶν β' ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ κοίμησις αὐτοῦ).

CII 319: Here lies Irene, virgin wife of Clodius, brother of Quintus Claudius Synesius, Father of the Synagogue of the Campesians in Rome. Shalom (ἐνθάδε κῖτε Εἰρήνα παρθενικὴ σύμβιος Κλωδίου ἀδελφὸς Κούντου Κλαυδίου Συνεσίου πατρὸς συναγωγῆς Καμπησίων Πώμης 𐤇𐤌𐤓).

CII 494: He[re] lie[s D]omnus, F[at]her of the Synagog[ue of the V]ernacians, three-time ex[ec]utive and twice [s]ecr[eta]ry. May hi[s s]le[e]p be in pea[ce] (ἐν[θάδε] κεῖ[τε] Δ[ο]μνος π[ατ]ῆρ συναγωγ[ῆς Β]ερνάκλων τρις ἄ[ρχ]ων καὶ δις [φ]ροντ[ιστῆ]ς ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ κ[ο]ίμησις αὐ[τοῦ]).

CII 509: Here lies Pancharius, Father of the Synagogue of Elaea, aged 110 years, who loved people and respected Commandments and lived a good life. May his sleep be in peace (ἐνθάδε κεῖται Πανχάριος πατὴρ συναγωγῆς Ἐλαίας ἐτῶν ἑκατὼν δέκα φιλόλαος φιλέντολος καλῶς βιώσας ἢν εἰρήνῃ ἢ κοίμησις αὐτοῦ).

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