

## A JEWISH OR GENTILE PRAYER HOUSE? THE MEANING OF ΠΡΟΣΕΥΧΗ

Irina Levinskaya

There is no doubt that the Greek word προσευχή has the meaning 'Jewish prayer house'. The real question is whether it can also refer to a Gentile sanctuary either as a result of Jewish in or independently. The answer to this question is fundamental for deciding what the links were between the worshippers of the Most High God (θεὸς ὑψιστος) in the Bosporan kingdom and Judaism. If the word προσευχή was used by Gentiles to designate their sanctuaries we must assume that in the Bosporan kingdom adherents of the Most High God could have been worshipping a pagan deity, having borrowed from the Jews some features of their religious language. But if the word προσευχή was attached exclusively to the Jewish synagogues it means that adherents of the Most High God in the Bosporan kingdom must have been closely connected with the synagogue, i.e. they were the God-fearers. This could explain the rapid spread of Christianity in the region from the first known Christian epitaph of AD 304 to the participation of the Bosporan Bishop in the First Ecumenical Council twenty-one years later.

In three documents of manumission from Panticapaeum it is stated that the slaves received their freedom in the synagogue (ἐπὶ τῆς προσευχῆς) under the guardianship of the Jewish community (συνεπιτροπευούσης δὲ καὶ τῆς συναγωγῆς τῶν Ἰουδαίων)<sup>1</sup> and another inscription from Panticapaeum informs us that in 306 AD the imperial governor of Theodosia (ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς Θεοδοσίας) Aurelius Valerius Sogus built a προσευχή to the Most High God,<sup>2</sup> to whom more private dedications in the Bosporan kingdom than to any other god (in Tanais, for instance all private dedications) were made in the I-III centuries. Is it possible to assert with confidence that προσευχή always has the meaning 'Jewish prayer house' or 'prayer house

---

<sup>1</sup> CIRB 70, 71, 73.

<sup>2</sup> CIRB 64.

of a judaizing sect' like the Messalians,<sup>3</sup> so that Sogus was in some sense an adherent of Judaism? It seems that the available evidence leads us to answer this question positively. The word προσευχή was never used by classical authors even in its first meaning—prayer.<sup>4</sup> It is also extremely rare in papyri and epigraphical sources.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand it was very popular among Hellenistic Jewish and later Christian writers. To begin with it is mentioned 114 times in the LXX where it usually renders the word תפלה.<sup>6</sup> As for the secondary meaning—that of 'prayer house' it is well attested as a 'Jewish prayer house' by the epigraphical material<sup>7</sup> and also by both Gentile<sup>8</sup> and Jewish authors. Philo mentions προσευχή so often, that E. Goodenough is able to insist that 'it has made epigraphists in general feel it safe to presume that any inscription which uses the word is probably Jewish, unless other evidence contradicts'.<sup>9</sup> What possible evidence could this be? The most serious indications that προσευχή can have the meaning of 'Gentile sanctuary' come from two inscriptions—one from Epidaurus (IV cent. BC)<sup>10</sup> and the other from Amastris (III cent. AD).<sup>11</sup>

The fact that in the Epidaurian inscription προσευχή is used in its secondary sense was admitted by the editor of this inscription, and also by L.H. Greeven,<sup>12</sup> W. Bauer<sup>13</sup> and M. Stern.<sup>14</sup> But it seems to me to be rather questionable. The fact is that there are large lacunae both before the word we are interested in and soon afterwards: ἐρ[γώναι<sup>18</sup>...]σ τας ποτευχας καὶ τοῦ βωμο[ῦ] ἐλομένω δραχμᾶς [<sup>45</sup>...]. These are not enough

<sup>3</sup> *Epiphanius Pan.* 80, 1.

<sup>4</sup> According to *TLG*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance BGU IV.1080 (a private letter, III AD.).

<sup>6</sup> προσευχή like תפלה has the meaning of both said and sung prayer. See M. Hengel 'Proseuche und Synagoge', *Tradition und Glaube Festgabe für K. G. Kuhn* (1971), 161, A.15.

<sup>7</sup> For the first time in the Egyptian inscription of III cent. BC (*CIJ* II, 1440).

<sup>8</sup> Juvenal, *Sat.* III., 296; Cleomedes, *De motu circ. corp. caelest.* II, 1; Artemidorus 3, 53, 1; 3, 53, 4; *Apion ap. Josephus, Contr. Ap.* II, 10.

<sup>9</sup> E. Goodenough *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, II, 86.

<sup>10</sup> *IG* IV, 1 ed. mM. 106, 27.

<sup>11</sup> E. Kalinka 'Aus Bithynien und Umgegend' *ÖJ* 28, 1(1933). Beiblatt, Sp.61.

<sup>12</sup> *TDNT* II, 808.

<sup>13</sup> *BAGD* s.v. προσευχή.

<sup>14</sup> 'Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism', II, 330 N 395.

to enable us to restore the lost text. It is possible to understand the word ΠΟΤΕΥΧΑΣ (Doric for προσευχας), metonymically only if it is understood as a genitive singular and is coupled with τοῦ βωμοῦ.<sup>15</sup> But τᾶς ποτευχᾶς may depend upon the genitive of a word which is lost and which is connected by καί with τοῦ βωμοῦ. In that case it can have its first meaning. ΠΟΤΕΥΧΑΣ might just as well be an accusative plural and thus The plural form excludes the possibility that προσευχή has Here a metonymic meaning. But is not only considerations of that kind which lead to the conclusion that such a change of meaning could not have occurred without Jewish influence (and of course it is impossible to imagine such influence in the Epidaurus of the IV cent. BC). From a linguistic point of view, it is not a natural development of Greek usage, according to which words like ἀγορά or συναγωγή had the meaning 'gathering' or 'assembly' before they came to refer to a particular place, nor was prayer a major part of the activities of a Greek sanctuary.

The inscription from Amastris reads: θεῶ | ἀνεικίτω | Ἄσβαμεῖ | κα[ί] | Γῆ (?) κυρία προσ|ευχῆ εὐξά|μενος καὶ | ἐπιτυχῶν | ἀνέθηκα Αὐ|ρήλιος Πρω|τόκτητος εὐχαριστή|[ρι]ο[v]. The editor of this inscription did not exclude the possibility that it is necessary to read 1-11 instead of N. L. Robert considered this variant to be correct.<sup>16</sup> He thought that here yeuxii refers to the community: 'La dédicace est faite, comme si souvent a la communauté (τῆ συνόδῳ τοῖς μυσταῖς, τῆ συναγωγῆ) en même temps qu'au dieu; et l'association recoil L'épithète de κυρία'. Robert also noted that the word προσευχή appears in this dedication under Jewish influence. His opinion is shared by M. Hengel.<sup>17</sup> L.H. Kant also mentions that reux-ri which usually has the meaning 'prayer house' was used on one occasion with the meaning 'community'.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile Robert's interpretation is doubtful precisely because προσευχή was never used as a word for com-

<sup>15</sup> See for instance, L.H. Greeven, *loc cit.* 'The use with βωμός indicates a concrete sense, i.e. a 'place of prayer'.

<sup>16</sup> L. Robert, 'Les inscriptions grecques et latines de Sardes' *Rev. arch.* (1936) 6. 7,

<sup>17</sup> Hengel, *op cit.*, 179 (see n. 6).

<sup>18</sup> L. H. Kant, 'Jewish Inscriptions in Greek and Latin' in *ANRW* II, 20, 2, 692f.

munity, which is why it cannot be put in the same category as the words ἡ σύνοδος, τὸ κοινόν, ἡ συναγωγή. If we reject Robert's interpretation on the ground that there is no evidence for the meaning he suggested for προσευχή, we have to consider the following possibilities.

1. προσευχή means 'prayer house' and thus εὐχαριστήριον is made to the pagan divinity and to his main sanctuary (in this area).<sup>19</sup> Against this possibility is the fact that the word κυρία cannot be combined well with words which refer to buildings of some sort. This seems to me to be the reason why such a connoisseur of the Greek language as the late Lois Robert suggested that προσευχή has a special meaning here. Typical of this is the remark of Hengel: 'Neben der Gottheit wird auch ihr Versammlungsort—der hier eventuell gar die Bezeichnung des Kultvereins selbst bedeutet—geehrt'.<sup>20</sup>

2. προσευχή means 'prayer' and thus the dedication is made to the deity and to the most mighty prayer, i.e. because the prayer was successful. As far as can be ascertained this meaning is not found elsewhere and thus must be rejected too.

3. The correct reading is Γῆ and προσευχή is connected with εὐξάμενος. The first editor of this inscription, E. Kalinka, hesitated to choose between τῆ or Γῆ as the correct reading. There are no purely epigraphical grounds for preferring one of these readings over the other. Κυρία as an epithet of divinity occurs with the names of Hera, Artemis, Hygeia, Isis etc. Cases when this epithet is combined with Ge are unknown to me, but words of similar meaning, though more solemn, like ἄνασσα, πότνια, are known to occur with her name. Ζεὺς Ἀσβαμαῖος, called thus from the name of the spring near Tyana<sup>21</sup> was the oath-keeping (Ζεὺς Ὀρκιος), and thus the link between his

<sup>19</sup> Dedications to a deity and to its sanctuary as well are known. See, for instance, A.B. Cook *Zeus* (1925) II, 881f., pl. XXXIX. Jewish examples are collected in B. Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives* (1967), 37.

<sup>20</sup> M. Hengel, *loc. cit.* (see n. 17).

<sup>21</sup> PWRE, 2, s.v. Ἀσβαμαῖος. The connection between Ζεὺς Ἀσβαμαῖος and θεὸς Ἀσβαμεύς was pointed out by E. Kalinka. The remark of R. Kahane in his review BZ (1986), 79, 'A 2, 357 on L. Zgusta's *Kleinasiatische Ortsnamen* (1984) that the latter considers Ἀσβαμεύς to be derived from the place-name Ἀσιβα is sheer misunderstanding.

name and that of Ge, who was mentioned after Zeus in oaths seems to be not unnatural.<sup>22</sup>

The *figura etymologica* εὐχὴν (εὐχὰς) εὐχόμενος is well attested both by literary texts<sup>23</sup> and by inscriptions.<sup>24</sup> It seems possible that here we have an analogical combination προσευχῆ(ν) εὐξάμενος, where the loss of ν occurs under the influence of the preceding datives. Another possibility is suggested by formula προσευχῆ προσεύχεσθαι<sup>25</sup> which was probably borrowed with only slight change from the Jewish religious vocabulary. Nevertheless this interpretation seems to me to be more convincing than the assumption that προσευχῆ has an exceptional meaning here.

The examination of inscriptions from Epidaurus and Amastris shows the lack of unquestionable testimonies that Gentiles used the word προσευχῆ for their sanctuaries. There is thus no reason to conclude that it was any different in the Bosporan Kingdom. Who was Aurelius Sogus? It is difficult to say. He may have been a Jew, a proselyte, or a God-fearer. But it can be said with some certainty that in the προσευχῆ, which he built and in the προσευχῆ, where the slaves were manumitted one and the same God was adored—θεὸς ὕψιστος παντοκράτωρ εὐλογητός.<sup>26</sup> —the God of the Jews.

If we accept the existence of God-fearers in the Bosporan kingdom, then we cannot ignore Bosporan material when we discuss questions relating to the God-fearers, which are currently the subject of lively debate. An old controversy has recently been re-opened following the publication of a number of provocative articles by A.T. Kraabel.<sup>27</sup> His doubt makes it necessary to analyse once again the apparently well

<sup>22</sup> Cf. also the relief from Lycaonia representing a male and a female figure with the inscription above the head of the latter IAIA (Γαῖα). W.H.C. Frend, the editor of this inscription, considers it to represent Zeus and Ge, *Anat. Stud.* (1956) VI, 95-99, fig.1.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance, Demosht. XIX, 130; Aesch. 3, 18.

<sup>24</sup> *SEG* XXVIII N 888 (Lydia); *Syll.*<sup>3</sup> 1003 (Priena).

<sup>25</sup> *Jac.* 5: 17.

<sup>26</sup> *CIRB* 1123, 1125, 1126 (Gorgippia).

<sup>27</sup> The Disappearance of the God-Fearers', *Numen* 28:2 (1981) 113-26; 'The Roman Diaspora: Six Questionable Assumptions', *JJS* 33 (1982) 445-64; 'Greeks, Jews and Lutherans in the Middle Half of Acts', *HTR* 79 (1986) 147-57; 'The God-Fearers--A Literary and Theological Invention', *BAR* 12.5 (1986) 47-53 (with R.S. MacLenman)

studied terminology connected with the questions of proselytes and God-fearers from the Hebrew scripture and LXX to the Acts of the Apostles and rabbinic literature.<sup>28</sup> At this new stage in the discussion the analysis of the archaeological material, primarily inscriptions, is particularly important when taking account of his archaeological approach. For this reason the best answer to Kraabel's doubt was provided by the recent publication of the inscription from Aphrodisias, which unambiguously confirms the existence of God-fearers.<sup>29</sup> However this inscription raises with renewed force the question important for New Testament scholars of the relationship between the God-fearers and the Jewish community. If the God-fearers could indeed be members of the synagogue this would allow us to view the events described in the Acts in a new light.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, W.C. Allen, 'On the meaning of προσήλυτος in the Septuagint', *Exp.* IV, 10 (1894) 264-75; T.J. Meek, 'The translation of *ger* in the Hexateuch and its bearing to the documentary hypothesis', *JBL* 49 (1930) 172-80; K. Lake, 'Proselytes and God-fearers', *The Beginnings of Christianity*, ed. K. Lake and F. Foakes Jackson, V, 1 (1933) 74-96; K.G. Kuhn *TDNT* VI, 727-44; Romaniuk K. Die 'gottesfürchtigen' im Neuen Testament: Beitrag zur neutestamentlichen Theologie der Gottesfurcht, *Aegyptus* 44:1-2 (1964) 66-91, Siebert F. Gottesfürchtige and Sympathisanten, *JSJ* 42 (1973) 109-64.

<sup>29</sup> J. Reynolds, R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-fearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary*, Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Association Supp. 12 (Cambridge Philological Society, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> The epigraphic evidence for God-fearers will be discussed by me in an extended article in the next issue of this journal.