

Reconsidering the question of separate seating in ancient synagogues

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ABSTRACT Before the twentieth century most scholars thought that men and women sat separately in ancient synagogues. However, in the late twentieth century Shmuel Safrai and Bernadette Brooten argued that there was neither literary nor archaeological evidence of separate seating in ancient synagogues. Their arguments eventually led to a new scholarly consensus, recently articulated by Lee Levine: ‘there can be little doubt that throughout late antiquity, Jews gathered in the synagogue for ritual purposes without making any distinctions in seating arrangements for males and females’.¹ The following article suggests that instead of a uniform situation where men and women either sat together or sat separately in ancient synagogues, the literary, archaeological, and cultural evidence allows for both possibilities, and therefore synagogue seating must be considered on a case-by-case basis.²

There is sufficient literary evidence from late antiquity – including references in Philo, Josephus, the New Testament, and early rabbinic sources – to prove that women were commonly present in at least some ancient synagogues during times of worship.³ The focus of this article is to discuss *where* women were present in ancient synagogues when they were there during times of worship. Did they sit together with male worshippers? Or did they sit in a separate area of the synagogue?

1. Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 477.

2. This paper was first presented in November 2009 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in New Orleans. I should like to thank Steve Werlin and the anonymous reviewer for reading earlier versions of this paper and for their important and helpful comments.

3. For example, see Acts 16:12–13, 17:1–4, 10–12; Luke 13:10–14; Philo, *Contempl. Life* 66–82; Josephus, *J.W.* 2. 560; *γSot* 1:4, 16c–d; *bAZ* 38a–b; *tMeg* 3:11; Chrysostom, *Adv. Jud.* 3, 1; 3, 2; 7, 4. See also Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 35–40, 57–94, 139–41; and Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 471–91. This evidence, however, does not prove that women were present in *all* ancient synagogues. The evidence is simply too fragmentary to bear the weight of such a claim.

Until the mid-twentieth century most scholars assumed that while women could be found in ancient synagogues, they were restricted to women's sections.⁴ The assumption was that medieval and early modern synagogues, with their clear separation of men and women using balconies and room dividers, continued a tradition that had been in place since the origin of synagogue worship and lasted until the modern period when a new trend of mixed seating began.⁵ Because of this assumption, when excavations of ancient synagogues began in the twentieth century and balconies were identified in the remains, these were naturally identified as places where women sat during worship.⁶ Even when explicit evidence of balconies was not found in the archaeological remains, they were assumed to have existed and read into the evidence.⁷ The theory was that since men and women would have sat separately, balconies or other room dividers must have existed and must have been used for this purpose.

In the mid-twentieth century the tides shifted when Shmuel Safrai argued that there was neither literary nor archaeological evidence to prove sufficiently that men and women sat separately in ancient synagogues.⁸ In the early 1980s Bernadette Brooten bolstered Safrai's argument with her extremely convincing case against the tendency of scholars to identify balconies in the archaeological record for synagogues where there is little evidence, and to describe these hypothetical balconies as women's sections.⁹ Nearly thirty

4. See Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 475; Ze'ev Safrai, 'Dukhan, Aron and Teva: How Was the Ancient Synagogue Furnished?', in Rachel Hachlili (ed.), *Ancient Synagogues in Israel: Third–Seventh Century C.E.*, BAR International Series (Oxford: BAR, 1989), 79; Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 195–96; E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols (New York: Pantheon, 1953–68), i.182; and E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 48.

5. See Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 475.

6. See Samuel Krauss, *Die galiläischen Synagogenruinen*, iii (Berlin: Veröffentlichung der Gesellschaft für Palästinaforschung, 1911), 15; C. H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue: The Excavations at Dura-Europas* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956), 31; Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 103; and Nahman Avigad, 'Beth Alpha', in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (Jerusalem: The Israel Exploration Society & Carta, 1993), 191.

7. Shmuel Safrai, 'Was There a Women's Gallery in the Synagogues of Antiquity?', *Tarbiz* 22 (1963): 333–34.

8. Ibid. The idea that men and women did not sit separately in ancient synagogues was first suggested by Leopold Loew, who pointed out that the Talmud does not mention a women's section for synagogues in late antiquity. See Leopold Loew, 'Der synagogale Ritus', *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 33 (1884): 364–74. A few decades later Richard Krautheimer suggested a gradual development from mixed to separate seating. See Richard Krautheimer, *Mittelalterliche Synagogen* (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt, 1927), 54.

9. Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 103–38.

years ago Brooten wrote that ‘rather than simply relying on the consensus of scholarship, it is time to rethink the prevailing view, to produce evidence where it exists and to alter one’s hypothesis where it doesn’t’.¹⁰ For Brooten, whose goal was to identify leadership roles of women in ancient synagogues, it was crucial to get past the scholarly assumption that men and women in ancient synagogues sat in separate areas. After all, if ‘all ancient synagogues relegated women to a side room, a balcony or to the back of the prayer hall’, then it would be difficult to imagine these women having leadership roles.¹¹ Based on her analysis, none of the archaeological or literary evidence leads to the conclusion that synagogues had separate seating in late antiquity. What has got lost in Brooten’s successful argument is her cautious approach: she never claims that there were no women’s sections in ancient synagogues, only that there is no explicit evidence of them.¹²

Despite Brooten’s cautious approach, a new scholarly consensus about separate seating in ancient synagogues was formed. As a direct result of the efforts of Safrai and Brooten, the current consensus is that throughout late antiquity women both attended synagogues on a regular basis, and they were not segregated in any manner from men. It is only in the medieval period that explicit evidence appears for the separation of men and women in synagogues, and therefore the prevailing thought is that the practice only began at that time.¹³ Examples of the consensus can be found in an article by Hannah Safrai about women in ancient synagogues,¹⁴ in Ze’ev Safrai’s description of synagogue furnishings,¹⁵ in an article by Ross Kraemer about women in

10. Ibid. 137–8.

11. Ibid. 103.

12. Ibid. 103–38.

13. The first explicit literary evidence of the division of men and women in rabbinic sources comes from *Midrash Pirkei Mishnah (Bet ha-Midrash 3:75)*, an early medieval document (c. sixth to tenth century) that describes a partition of reeds that separated men from women in a fictional *beth midrash* of the Holy One. See Y. Even-Shmuel, *Midrashei Geula* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1954), 341. See also Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 477 n. 36; Z. Safrai, ‘Dukhan, Aron and Teva’ (as in n. 4), 78–79. In the medieval period there is evidence of a women’s section in the balcony of a Cairo synagogue. See S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 5 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), ii.144; id., ‘The Synagogue Building and Its Furnishing according to the Records of the Cairo Geniza’, *Eretz Israel* 7 (1964), 81–97 [Heb.]; and id., ‘A Women’s Gallery in the Synagogues of the Genizah Period’, *Tarbiz* 33 (1964), 314.

14. Hannah Safrai, ‘Women and the Ancient Synagogue’, in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, ed. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 39–50.

15. Z. Safrai, ‘Dukhan, Aron and Teva’ (as in n. 4), 78.

ancient Judaism,¹⁶ and it is clearly present in the scholarly discourse.¹⁷ But the most prominent proof that there is a new consensus is found in the textbook for ancient synagogue studies, Lee Levine's *The Ancient Synagogue*, where he boldly writes that 'there can be little doubt that throughout late antiquity, Jews gathered in the synagogue for ritual purposes without making any distinctions in seating arrangements for males and females'.¹⁸ The general starting-point for synagogue studies today is that when men and women worshipped in ancient synagogues, they sat together.¹⁹

In the following pages I shall argue that the pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other, and in the process has bypassed the historical reality that is best supported by the evidence. The wide-swing, however, is not due to the choice of evidence, but rather to a flawed methodological approach scholars take when dealing with the question of separate seating. When this subject arises, many scholars treat synagogues as if they evolved in a uniform and linear fashion from their origins where there was mixed seating, to the medieval period where there was separate seating, and finally to modernity where diversity exists.²⁰ The problem is that this approach has been completely rejected in most areas of ancient synagogue studies, and for good reason: the literary and archaeological evidence clearly suggests diversity for everything from architecture, to furnishings, to liturgy, to most importantly leadership.

16. Ross S. Kraemer, 'Jewish Women and Women's Judaism(s) at the Beginning of Christianity', in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (eds), *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64–65. In an earlier book Kraemer mentions the consensus view, but leaves the door somewhat open to the possibility of separate seating in ancient synagogues: Ross Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 106–7.

17. While the consensus can be found in the scholarly literature, its strength became apparent when I was working on the excavations of ancient synagogues in Khirbet Wadi Hamam and Ostia during the summer of 2009. Each time I brought up the topic of this article, the overwhelming response was that women and men always worshipped together in ancient synagogues. And when a visitor to the synagogue in Khirbet Wadi Hamam asked where the women's section was, the person giving the tour replied that ancient synagogues didn't have women's sections.

18. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 477.

19. There are those, however, who still argue for the old paradigm: e.g. William Horbury, 'Women in the Synagogue', in William Horbury, W. D. Davies, and John Sturdy (eds), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 3: *The Early Roman Period* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 358–401; and S. L. Mattila, 'Where Women Sat in Ancient Synagogues: The Archaeological Evidence in Context', in J. S. Kloppenborg and S. G. Wilson (eds), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), 266–87.

20. This approach to separate seating is seen most clearly when Z. Safrai argues that the passage from *Midrash Pirkei Mishnah* represents 'a transitional period between mixed services (and sermons) and the construction of a permanent women's gallery': Safrai, 'Dukhan, Aron and Teva' (as in n. 4), 78–9.

Whereas it was once thought that ancient synagogue worship would have fallen under a 'normative Judaism' controlled by rabbinic authorities, and therefore somewhat uniform, recent studies convincingly argue that rabbinic influence and control over synagogue worship was minimal prior to the medieval period.²¹ Today, it is generally accepted that early synagogues and their worship practices were determined by local leadership, and this is why the evidence is quite diverse.²² Lee Levine puts it perfectly in the epilogue of *The Ancient Synagogue*:

The 'exuberant diversity' referred to at the outset of our study as characterizing the ancient synagogue is evident throughout this period. It makes little difference whether the discussion has focused on the nomenclature of the synagogue, officials, architecture, art, inscriptions, or liturgy; in each and every one of these areas the ancient synagogue reflects a kaleidoscope of styles, shapes, customs, and functions that is best accounted for by two complimentary factors: the degree of influence of the non-Jewish social and religious milieu on the synagogue and the fact that the institution was first and foremost a local one. The tastes and proclivities of each and every community or congregation governed all aspects of the local synagogue – physical functional, cultural, and religious.²³

21. E. R. Goodenough was the first to suggest that rabbinic sources do not reflect the Jewish religion found in the remains of synagogues. See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (as in n. 4). For more recent works that suggest minimal rabbinic influence over synagogue practice and worship, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, 'Were Pharisees and Rabbis the Leaders of Communal Prayer and Torah Study in Antiquity? The Evidence of the New Testament, Josephus and the Early Church Fathers', in *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*, ed. Howard Clark Kee and Lynn H. Cohick (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 89–105; id., 'The Rabbi in Second-Century Jewish Society', in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, iii (as in n. 19), 922–90; Tzvee Zahavy, *Studies in Jewish Prayer* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990); Lee I. Levine, 'The Sages and the Synagogues in Late Antiquity', in Lee I. Levine (ed.), *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 201–24. Seth Schwartz effectively discusses the limited formal role of the rabbis on the lives of Palestinian Jews in the third and fourth centuries in *Imperialism and Jewish Society 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 103–28. Although their influence was growing at this time (primarily in and around cities), and many Jews may have consulted them because they were experts in Torah, Schwartz argues that 'the rabbis did not control anything in rural Palestine – not synagogues, not charity collection or distribution, nor anything else'.

22. See Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 3, 72–3, 292, 364–5; Dennis E. Groh, 'The Stratigraphic Chronology of the Galilean Synagogue from the Early Roman Period through the Early Byzantine Period (Ca. 420 C.E.)', in Dan Urman and Paul V. M. Flesher (eds), *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 51–69.

23. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 604. Martin Goodman's recent article about a vibrant Jewish diversity after the destruction of the Second Temple further highlights the diversity in Jewish life at the very time ancient synagogues were becoming the central place for Jewish worship. Martin Goodman, 'Religious Variety and the Temple in the Late Second Temple Period and Its Aftermath', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 60 (2009), 202–13.

In the light of the diverse and localized understanding of ancient synagogues in all aspects, it is puzzling that a uniform and evolutionary approach still prevails when it comes to separate seating.

When the evidence is approached from a perspective that does not expect to find uniformity, however, four things become apparent: (1) there is explicit evidence of the separation of men and women in some ancient synagogues; (2) there are ancient literary sources that provide evidence of the idea of separating men and women during times of worship; (3) there is also evidence that suggests separate seating was *not* practised in some synagogues; and (4) much of the literary and archaeological evidence is ambiguous or allows for multiple interpretations. In other words, the evidence precludes a single answer to the question for all ancient synagogues. In order to argue for this more nuanced approach to the study of separate seating in ancient synagogues, I shall look at three types of evidence: literary sources that discuss women in synagogues and other Jewish worship settings, archaeological evidence of separate seating areas, and literary sources that discuss the separation of men and women in contemporaneous non-Jewish settings.

Literary evidence of women in ancient Jewish worship settings

The primary argument for the consensus of mixed seating focuses on the literary evidence: since there is no explicit reference in the literary sources for the universal practice of separate seating, it was not practised in ancient synagogues.²⁴ There are a couple of problems with this argument. First, it incorrectly assumes that the available literary evidence provides a complete picture for synagogue practice in late antiquity. In reality, only a fraction of the ancient literary sources that once existed have survived to the present,²⁵ and those that we do have were written by people who were not in control of most synagogues, nor were they particularly interested in discussing synagogues.²⁶ Second, it assumes that there was a normative practice for synagogue seating that developed diachronically, but was uniform at any

24. See Sh. Safrai, 'Was There a Women's Gallery?' (as in n. 7); and Broton, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 130.

25. See David Henige, *Historical Evidence and Argument* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 42–3.

26. For the discussion of the rabbinic influence on synagogue practice, see n. 19 above.

given point in history. However, based on everything we know about ancient synagogues this is an incorrect assumption. If we are willing to consider the literary evidence without trying to reach a normative understanding of synagogue seating, it turns out that there is evidence that suggests men and women were separated in some ancient Jewish worship settings, even while there is also evidence that can be interpreted as reflecting a setting where men and women did not sit separately.

An early and explicit example of separate seating in a Jewish worship setting is found in Philo's first-century description of the *Therapeutae*:²⁷

And this common sanctuary in which they meet every seventh day is a double enclosure, one portion set apart for the use of the men, the other for the women. For women too regularly make part of the audience with the same ardour and the same sense of their calling [καὶ γὰρ καὶ γυναῖκες ἐξ ἔθους συνακροῶνται τὸν αὐτὸν ζῆλον καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν προαίρεσιν ἔχουσαι]. The wall between the two chambers rises up from the ground to three or four cubits built in the form of a breastwork, while the space above up to the roof is left open. This arrangement serves two purposes; the modesty becoming to the female sex is preserved, while the women sitting within earshot can easily follow what is said since there is nothing to obstruct the voice of the speaker. (*Contempl. Life* 32–33)²⁸

Although this passage clearly refers to the separation of men and women in a worship setting, it has commonly been rejected as evidence because it refers to a sectarian community, and therefore does not reflect the typical synagogue.²⁹ To begin, it is important to remember that scholars have not identified a 'typical' synagogue to which Philo's description can provide a contrast.³⁰ Furthermore, the fact that the *Therapeutae* are described as a unique and atypical Jewish community does not mean that everything in the

27. There have been debates about whether Philo is describing a real community of Jews or an idealization of communal life. Ross Kraemer makes the convincing point that 'the fact that Philo locates the community near Alexandria also suggests the basic veracity of his account, since at least some of his readers would have been able to verify the presence or absence of such a group if it was within easy traveling distance to the city': Ross S. Kraemer, 'Monastic Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Egypt: Philo Judaeus on the Therapeutrides', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14 (1989), 347.

28. Philo also describes the *Therapeutae* having communal meals with men and women sitting separately (*Contempl. Life* 69).

29. Sh. Safrai, 'Was There a Women's Gallery?' (as in n. 7), 334; Mattila, 'Where Women Sat' (as in n. 19), 276; Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 133–34; and Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 476.

30. For a description of the diversity in first-century synagogues, see Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 45–173.

description of their worship practices was unique to them.³¹ In this regard, it is important to note that Philo never claims that they are the only Jewish community that separates men and women during worship. In fact, instead of highlighting the separation of men and women, the passage may be highlighting two things about how women in this community participated in worship: (1) that women participated equally with men;³² and (2) that their particular method of separating men and women allowed for equal participation. According to this reading, the seating arrangement lets the women ‘regularly make part of the audience with the same ardour and the same sense of their calling’ because it puts them ‘within ear-shot’ so they ‘can easily follow what is said since there is nothing to obstruct the voice of the speaker’. In other words, it is the method of separation that allows the women to participate equally without sacrificing modesty. Although this passage only explicitly describes separate seating for one Jewish community, it raises three important historical possibilities: that other synagogues may have also separated men and women during worship, that other synagogues may have used different methods for separating men and women, and that women may have been less likely to participate in synagogue worship in other communities.³³

Literary references to a women’s court in the Herodian Temple provide additional evidence of the separation of the sexes in a worship setting during the first few centuries of the Common Era, even if they do not specifically refer to a synagogue setting. Josephus provides a near-contemporary description of the Herodian Temple:

31. For example, like other Jews the *Therapeutae* are described as meeting on the seventh day for communal worship. See also Horbury, ‘Women in the Synagogue’, 384.

32. In this regard, Ross Kraemer points out that throughout the description of the *Therapeutae*, Philo ‘emphasizes the equal participation of women and men’. Kraemer, ‘Monastic Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Egypt’ (as in n. 27), 344 n. 6. See also Peter Richardson, *Building Jewish in the Roman East* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), 179–85.

33. On the other hand, the evidence from the New Testament, where Jesus and Paul consistently meet women in synagogues, suggests that there were certainly synagogues where women were active participants. See, for example, the discussions in Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 472–73; Sh. Safrai, ‘Was There a Women’s Gallery?’ (as in n. 7); and Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 139–41. For later centuries, Tal Ilan has suggested that the exemption of women from time-bound commandments in the rabbinic literature may have resulted in fewer female participants in synagogues that were influenced by rabbinic leaders: Tal Ilan, ‘Women in Jewish Life and Law’, in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, iv: *The Late Roman–Rabbinic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 637–44.

On its southern and northern sides the inner court had three-chambered gateways, equally distant from one another, and on the side where the sun rises it had one great gateway, through which those of us who were ritually clean used to pass with our wives. Within this court was the sacred (court) which women were forbidden to enter [ἔσωτέρῳ δὲ κακείνου γυναιξὶν ἄβατον ἦν τὸ ἱερόν], and still farther within was a third court into which only priests were permitted to go. (*Ant.* 15. 419)³⁴

According to Josephus' description, although both men and women were allowed in the Women's Court, women were not permitted to go beyond this area; certain areas of the Temple were reserved for men only. It has been argued that this does not provide evidence of the separation of the men and women in a worship setting because men were allowed to be in the women's section.³⁵ The rejection of this passage, however, focuses on the fact that men and women were both allowed in the Women's Court instead of the fact that *only* men were allowed beyond the Women's Court. Therefore, while this passage does not describe strict separation in the Women's Court, it does describe separation of the sexes in the sacred court, where only men were allowed.³⁶

The Mishnah adds to the evidence of separating men and women in a Second Temple worship setting when it suggests that there was a temporary separation during the annual Water Drawing ceremony of Sukkot:

The Women's Court [*'ezrat nashim*] was 135 [cubits] in length by 135 [cubits] in width [...] later they surrounded [the Women's Court] with a balcony so that the women should look on from above and the men were down below in order that they should not intermingle. (*mMid* 2:5)³⁷

According to the parallel version of this passage in *tSuk* 4:1, the balcony was built in order to separate men and women at a time when dancing would take place in order to prevent licentious behaviour [*kalut rosh*]. While Josephus' description provides first-century evidence that women were probably prevented from entering certain areas of the Temple at all times, these third-century tannaitic sources discuss certain times when there was a stricter

34. Josephus, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray et al, 10 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926–65). See also Josephus, *War* 5. 199, 227.

35. See Sh. Safrai, 'Was There a Women's Gallery?' (as in n. 7), 331–33; and Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 130.

36. It is important not to reject this evidence because it does not fit the strict type of separation known from later synagogues where men were also not allowed in the women's section.

37. See also *mSuk* 5:1–4.

separation of men and women even in places where they were usually allowed to intermingle. Both Safrai and Brooten correctly warn against extrapolating these descriptions of separating men and women during a festival to conclusions of universal separation in synagogues.³⁸ Completely dismissing them as evidence is also unwarranted. The evidence of separating men and women in the Temple does not prove that there was separate seating in late-antique synagogues, but it certainly shows that both first- and third-century Jews wrote about separating men and women in worship settings.

The New Testament provides an additional example where men and women are not worshipping in mixed company. In Acts 16:12–14 Paul is described as talking to the women [γυναῖξίν] who had gathered in the Jewish prayer-house [προσευχήν] in Philippi on the Sabbath, implying that women alone were praying at this time. Brooten uses this passage to prove that women attended synagogue, but it also suggests that in some synagogues, or on certain occasions, women worshipped without men.³⁹ This is not a separation of men and women in a particular building, but it does represent a worship setting where men and women were not mixed together.

Another passage to consider is *γSuk* 5:1 (55b), which describes men and women studying Torah in the famous Double-Stoa in Alexandria when they are attacked by Trajan. After the men were killed, Trajan tells the wives to listen to him in order to remain alive. The women then say to Trajan ‘do to those above you [*‘iylaye’*] as you have done below [*‘ar’aye’*].’⁴⁰ Brooten and Levine correctly point to an interesting textual variation that raises questions about the historical reliability of the story: the parallel in Lamentations

38. Sh. Safrai, ‘Was There a Women’s Gallery?’ (as in n. 7), 331; and Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 132.

39. See *ibid.* 139–40. See also Kraemer, ‘Monastic Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Egypt’ (as in n. 27), 367–69.

40. Marcus Jastrow’s translation of the Aramaic terms ‘*iylaye*’ and ‘*ar’aye*’ as ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ suggests that the passage is not concerned with physical location. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Luzac and New York: Putnam, 1903; repr. New York: The Judaica Press, Inc., 1996), 125. The problem is that Jastrow’s translation requires that the Lamentations Rabbah version calls the women inferior and that the *Yerushalmi* version calls the women superior. With this translation, the textual variant makes less sense than if the words signify location. Perhaps in an effort to allow for Jastrow’s translation in the Lamentations Rabbah version, Neusner translates the *Yerushalmi* version as: ‘They said to him, “What you did to the ones who have fallen [*‘ar’aye’*] do also to us who are yet standing [*‘iylaye’*].”’ However, this translation cannot work for the Lamentations Rabbah version for obvious reasons. If both versions of the story use the terms in the same manner, and the use of the same terms suggests that they were intended to be used in the same manner, then the terms probably refer to physical location.

Rabbah 1:45 depicts the men in the area above the women.⁴¹ The reversing of the locations, however, does not negate the fact that in both versions of the story women and men are described as being in separate locations of the same building at a time when Torah study takes place.

A final passage to consider is *bKidd* 81a, which appears in a discussion about privacy between men and women:

R. Kahana said: If there are men without [i.e. in the outer chamber] and women within, we have no fear of privacy. If there are men in the inner chamber and women in the outer, we have fear of privacy. In a Baraita the reverse was taught. Said Abaye: Now that R. Kahana ruled thus, while the Baraita taught the reverse, let us act stringently. Abaye made a partition of jugs; Raba made a partition of canes.

According to Rashi, the setting is either a wedding or a sermon, but the passage itself does not identify the context. This passage clearly discusses separating men and women in public situations with a partition, even while Brooten is correct that it also suggests that not everyone agreed with the idea or that men and women were not separated in all situations.⁴² Whether the description reflects the cultural milieu of Babylonia in the sixth century, Palestine in the fourth century (when Abaye lived), or both, is impossible to determine. Nonetheless, the passage provides a clear example from late antiquity where some Jews thought it was important to separate men and women in public settings.

In addition to the sources that discuss separate seating in worship settings, there are also sources that discuss women in synagogues, but are either ambiguous about whether or not there was separate seating in the synagogue, or might even suggest that there was mixed seating. For example, there is the passage in Luke 13:10–14:

Now he [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues [συναγωγῶν] on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood

41. See Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 132–33; Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 476 n. 30. Shmuel Safrai raises another problem with this passage when he suggests that the building may refer to a fortress or a castle, and not a synagogue: Safrai, ‘Was There a Women's Gallery?’ (as in n. 7), 333. See also Brooten and Levine, loc. cit. However, the type of building does not matter since the activity taking place within the building constitutes worship.

42. Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 134.

up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.'

Although it is possible to interpret this passage in a context where men and women were separated – that is, he called her over from a women's section – it is more likely that this passage describes a situation where there was mixed seating. Not only does the writer not mention a barrier separating the women from the men, but the leader of the synagogue complains about the healing, without saying a word about bringing a woman to the men's side of the synagogue.

Two examples from the book of Acts provide more ambiguous situations. In Acts 17:1–4 Paul goes to a synagogue in Thessalonica and persuades a number of people, including 'a few of the leading women', that his ideas about the Messiah are correct. And in Acts 18:26: '[Apollós] began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.' While both passages describe women in synagogues at the same time as men, neither identifies where men and women sat in the synagogues. In fact, it is possible to imagine both scenes taking place in synagogues with or without separate seating.

In the few rabbinic stories that discuss women in ancient synagogues, the location of the women in relation to men is also usually left unstated. For example, *γBer* 5:4 (9d) suggests women and children should respond 'amen' to the priestly blessing if the town is comprised only of priests, but nothing is said about their location in the synagogue. They could equally respond 'amen' from a mixed seating area or a women's section. And *bSot* 22a, a Babylonian source that claims to describe a situation in third-century Palestine, discusses a widow who prayed at R. Yohanan's House of Study rather than her neighbourhood synagogue. However, the story does not identify where the woman would have sat in either location.

Finally, there is the story of the woman who went each Sabbath evening to hear R. Meir speak in the Hammat Tiberias synagogue (*γSot* 1:4, 16d).⁴³ The following passage describes part of the scene that took place in the

43. See also Leviticus Rabbah 9:9; Numbers Rabbah 9:20; and Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:15.

synagogue: ‘The woman’s female neighbours said to her [*’amrin lah megerta*], “Lo, your time to go back home has come. Pretend to be a charmer and go and spit in R. Meir’s eye.”’ Interestingly, the term used for neighbours in this passage specifically identifies them as female,⁴⁴ thus suggesting that women sat together in this synagogue, and possibly in a women’s section. However, in another version of the story the female neighbours talk to the woman before they enter the synagogue, and again once they are inside of the synagogue (Leviticus Rabbah 9:9). According to this version the women may have sat together because they went to the synagogue as a group and chose to sit together, and not because they were required to sit in a women’s section. As with many of the other examples in this section, the lack of explicit references to either a women’s section or mixed seating in the story prevents determining the type of seating with any certainty.⁴⁵

Revisiting some of the archaeological evidence

In *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogues* Bernadette Brooten convincingly argues that there is no explicit archaeological evidence of women’s sections in ancient synagogues.⁴⁶ The problem is that even where the archaeological evidence suggests the existence of balconies or side-rooms, there is nothing to identify them – e.g. an inscription – as women’s sections. Of course, it is crucial to point out that there is also nothing that identifies them as not being women’s sections.⁴⁷ In other words, it is certainly possible that any synagogue with archaeological evidence of a balcony could have had separate seating, especially when the literary evidence discussed above is taken into consideration.⁴⁸ In this section I shall look at the archaeological remains of

44. See Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, 2nd edn. (Ramat-Gan, Baltimore and London: Bar Ilan University Press and The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 290.

45. The above passages are important because they describe women in synagogues, but are ambiguous in terms of where the women would have sat, leaving the possibility open for competing interpretations. If one wants to argue that these passages prove that there was no separate seating in the described synagogues, then the writers of the stories do not identify where the women sat because there was no separate area to identify. However, if one wants to argue that these passages reflect a situation where there was separate seating, the reader would simply have assumed that there was separate seating, and therefore its inclusion in the story was unnecessary.

46. Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 103–30.

47. *Ibid.* 122, 37.

48. It is also possible that synagogues without balconies or side-rooms found other methods for separating men and women. This will be discussed below.

two synagogues and offer arguments for interpreting the galleries in these particular buildings as possible women's sections. Then I shall discuss the limits of using archaeology to answer the question of separate seating.

The first synagogue to consider is the third- to fifth-century synagogue in Khirbet Shema'.⁴⁹ The main hall of this synagogue is 9.3 × 13.9 m, for an area of 129 m², and is divided into two aisles and a nave by two east-west rows of four columns each.⁵⁰ There are two entrances into and out of the main hall, a grand entrance at the top of a staircase on the western wall,⁵¹ and a more modest doorway in the northern wall.⁵² Early in the fourth century a *bema* was added on the southern wall.⁵³ There are two additional areas associated with the main hall, a room on the western side of the hall and a gallery directly above the side room.⁵⁴ The gallery is accessible from the inside of the synagogue by an entrance at the top of the grand staircase on the western side of the hall. The dimensions of the gallery are 3 × 7 m, for an area of 21 m².⁵⁵ In the original excavation report, the excavators suggested that there might have been a separate entrance in the northern wall of the gallery, but the archaeological evidence of this door is minimal.⁵⁶

According to the final excavation report, the gallery on the western side of the hall is tentatively identified as a women's section.⁵⁷ However, the excavators also comment that 'the serious objections of S. Safrai are yet to be adequately dealt with'.⁵⁸ Brooten acknowledges that the reconstruction of

49. Eric M. Meyers, A. Thomas Kraabel, and James F. Strange, *Ancient Synagogue Excavations at Khirbet Shema', Upper Galilee, Israel 1970–1972* (Durham, NC: American Schools of Oriental Research & Duke University, 1976). Jodi Magness suggests that there is only one phase for the synagogue, and dates its construction to the end of the fourth century: Jodi Magness, 'Synagogue Typology and Earthquake Chronology at Khirbet Shema'', *Journal of Field Archaeology* 24, no. 2 (1997), 218. Earlier questions regarding the dating of this synagogue and the identification of two synagogues can be found in S. Loffreda's review of E. Meyers et al. (above) in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 244 (1981), 75–79; and E. Netzer, 'Review of the Synagogues at Gush Halav and Khirbet Shema'', *Eretz Israel*, 25 (1996), 450–55.

50. See David Milson, *Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Late Antique Palestine* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 37; and Meyers et al. *Ancient Synagogue Excavations* (as in n. 49), 37, fig. 3.3.

51. See the scale drawing *ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. Marilyn Joyce Segal Chiat, *Handbook of Synagogue Architecture* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 33–34; and Meyers et al., *Ancient Synagogue Excavations* (as in n. 49), 37, fig. 3.3 and 71–3.

54. Meyers, Kraabel, and Strange, *Ancient Synagogue Excavations at Khirbet Shema'*, 57–8.

55. *Ibid.*

56. The only evidence of a door is a small depression in the bedrock. However, even the excavators do not seem too convinced by the archaeological evidence since they identify the door as 'hypothetical'. *Ibid.*, 58.

57. *Ibid.*, 58 n. 29.

58. *Ibid.*, 58.

the gallery at Khirbet Shema⁵ is better than in many other cases, although she concludes that there is ‘no archaeological reason for assuming that it must be for women’.⁵⁹ To strengthen her argument she includes the following in a footnote: ‘in a letter to me on November 20, 1979, Eric M. Meyers [one of the excavators] writes that he is “not inclined to call the gallery a ‘women’s gallery’”’.⁶⁰ In other words, shortly after publishing the excavation reports, the excavators were convinced by Safrai and Brooten’s arguments that the gallery was not a women’s gallery.

But why cannot this gallery be identified as a possible women’s section? Both Shmuel Safrai and Sharon Lea Mattila reject the identification of the gallery as a women’s section because the entrance to the gallery was in the main hall, and logic suggests that if men and women were separated they would have had separate entrances.⁶¹ The problem with this argument is that we have no evidence of any rules for separating men and women in synagogues at this point in history. Therefore, logic actually dictates that this gallery cannot be rejected as a women’s section because it does not follow the rules. We simply do not know whether using the same entrance would have been allowed by this particular synagogue community. In fact, when men and women were separated in the description of the Water Drawing ceremony discussed above, there is no reference to women using separate entrances to gain access to the balcony.⁶² There is simply too little known about the community that used this building to claim that this gallery could not have been a women’s section. The only reason to reject this as a possible women’s section is the incorrect assumption that men and women always sat together in ancient synagogues.

The second synagogue to consider is from the village of Gush Halav. This building was excavated in 1977–78 and the excavators identified four phases from 250 CE until 551 CE, when an earthquake destroyed the building.⁶³

59. Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 112.

60. *Ibid.*, 254n64.

61. Shmuel Safrai, ‘The Place of Women in First-Century Synagogues’, *Jerusalem Perspective* 5 (1993): 5; and Mattila, ‘Where Women Sat’ (as in n. 19), 270. See also Meyers, Kraabel, and Strange, *Ancient Synagogue Excavations at Khirbet Shema*, 58.

62. Mattila also argues that the gallery is ‘awkwardly positioned’ with respect to the focus of worship and therefore was probably not used as a women’s section: Mattila, ‘Where Women Sat’ (as in n. 19), 270–72. The problem is that in a broad-house synagogue with internal columniation the focus of worship was itself awkwardly positioned. Indeed, both the north-eastern and north-western corners of the main hall would have had views obstructed by columns.

63. Jodi Magness has recently dated the synagogue to the second half of the fifth century based on

The floor plans for the first three phases of the building are nearly identical. The main hall of the synagogue in each case is 13.75×10.6 to 11 m,⁶⁴ for an area of approximately 148.5 m². The room is divided into a nave and two aisles with single benches along the western, northern and southern walls; a small *bema* was located on the southern wall to the west of the entrance in the first and second phase, but was then reduced in size. There are doors on the northern and southern walls to the outside and a door on the western wall to a side-room. In the fourth century an important change was made to the synagogue building. According to the architect Lawrence Belkin, at this time the side-room beyond the northern wall of the main hall was probably used as the base of a mezzanine section overlooking the main hall of the synagogue.⁶⁵ The mezzanine is approximately 8.5×1.5 m, for an area of 12.75 m² and was reached either by exterior steps or by interior wooden steps, which have not left any remains in the archaeological record.⁶⁶

There is very little within the building, other than the *bema*, the likely Jerusalem orientation, and a coin hoard that may have been a charity collection⁶⁷ that reveals much about the religious practices of the community. However, the mezzanine may provide a clue into the development of one of the synagogue's religious practices: separate seating. While the excavators suggest that 'a small mezzanine [was] added to accommodate a larger congregation',⁶⁸ an analysis of the building's seating capacity suggests this is an unlikely explanation. Whereas the main hall of the synagogue could accommodate approximately 160 people based on rudimentary seating

a re-evaluation of the archaeological reports: Jodi Magness, 'The Question of the Synagogue: The Problem of Typology', in Alan Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner (eds), *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, Part III, vol. 4: *Where We Stand: Issues and Debates in Ancient Judaism: The Special Problem of the Synagogue* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 16. For a critique of Magness's dating, see Eric M. Meyers, 'The Dating of the Gush Halav Synagogue: A Response to Jodi Magness', *ibid.* 51-70.

64. Eric Meyers, 'Excavations at Gush Halav in Upper Galilee', in Lee I. Levine (ed.), *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem: The Israel Exploration Society, 1982), 75-77; and Eric M. Meyers et al., 'Preliminary Report on the 1977 and 1978 Seasons at Gush Halav (El-Jish)', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 233 (1979): 39.

65. Lawrence Belkin, 'The Architectural Reconstruction of the Gush Halav', in Eric M. Meyers, Carol L. Meyers and James F. Strange (eds), *Excavations at the Ancient Synagogue of Gush Halav* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 104, 21.

66. *Ibid.* 106-8. In view of the lack of stairs leading to the mezzanine, Lawrence Belkin has also suggested that the area may simply have been an unoccupied area used as a retaining or supporting structure packed with fill.

67. Eric M. Meyers, Carol L. Meyers, and James F. Strange, *Excavations at the Ancient Synagogue of Gush Halav* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 243-45.

68. *Ibid.*, 120. See also Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, 113.

capacity estimates, the mezzanine could accommodate only 14 people.⁶⁹ This is less than a 10% seating capacity increase – and a grand total of 14 seats – providing a modest-at-best increase in seating space. In other words, this particular mezzanine could not have provided a long-term – or even much of a short-term – solution for a growing community that needed more seats in the synagogue.

Other explanations should therefore be considered. The addition of a mezzanine at Gush Ḥalav may provide archaeological evidence of both a women's section and a change in synagogue worship practices for *this particular* community: a move from mixed to separate seating. Another possibility is that the community may have made a move from separate seating with a non-permanent room divider in the main hall to separate seating using a mezzanine.⁷⁰ While this analysis doesn't prove there was a women's section in the Gush Ḥalav synagogue, it forces us to seriously consider the possibility.

At this point is important to raise two important methodological issues about using archaeological evidence to answer the question of separate seating. The first issue concerns the state of the archaeological evidence. Although there is archaeological evidence of over one hundred synagogue buildings from late antique Palestine,⁷¹ it is rare that archaeologists have uncovered anything more than the most durable furnishings: stone benches, columns, stone chairs, niches, apses, raised podiums, and mosaics. More ephemeral materials have long since disappeared. This means that we are inherently

69. Determining the seating capacities of ancient synagogues is not an exact science and involves a number of factors. See Chad Spigel, *Ancient Synagogue Seating Capacities: Methodology, Analysis, Limits* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming). In modern contexts architects often use a rule of thumb for determining how much space is needed to accommodate the desired capacity of the room. Henry Stolzman, an architect who has worked on a number of modern synagogues, takes the entire area of the room and estimates that each person would require 0.929 m² of space. This calculation accounts for any furnishings and other areas that would be left unoccupied, such as aisles. See Spigel, *Ancient Synagogue Seating Capacities*. The seating capacities of the Gush Ḥalav synagogue were calculated using this rule of thumb.

70. If we think that women were equal participants in synagogue worship, than this room certainly could *not* have been a women's section. However, we must consider the very real possibility that women were not always equal participants in ancient synagogue worship. As the passage above about the *Therapeutae* suggests, in the first century it may have been unusual for women to 'regularly make part of the audience with the same ardour and the same sense of their calling' as men (Philo, *Contempl. Life* 32–33). The fact that women were probably busy raising children could also explain their lack of participation in synagogue worship. See Stephen K. Catto, *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue: A Critical Analysis of Current Research*, ed. Mark Goodacre, Library of New Testament Studies (London: T & T Clark International, 2007), 177–28.

71. For the complete list down to 1991, see Zvi Ilan, *Ancient Synagogues in Israel* (Israel: Ministry of Defence, 1991).

working with an incomplete picture of ancient synagogues in terms of their interior furnishings, which impacts our ability to determine how and where people sat. In a recent study about wooden furniture at the first-century site of Herculaneum Stephan Mols suggests that our understanding of Roman-period furniture has been distorted because wooden furniture would have been abundant, but usually is not part of the archaeological record.⁷² The same is true for ancient synagogues, where separate seating may have been accomplished through the use of permanent galleries, but also through the use of room dividers made of wood,⁷³ or even curtains or hanging carpets,⁷⁴ without leaving remnants in the archaeological record. When it comes to the internal furnishings of synagogues, the historical dictum must always be kept in mind: the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. I am not suggesting that this means that all ancient synagogues had separate seating, but I am suggesting that historians must consider the possibility that synagogues where men and women sat separately may have left no physical evidence of the practice.

This brings us to the second methodological issue, which is best expressed as a question: can archaeological evidence ever completely answer the question of where men and women sat in ancient synagogue buildings? If there is an inscription identifying a balcony or area of the hall as the women's section, then yes, archaeology can answer the question for that particular synagogue.⁷⁵ The problem is that no such inscriptions exist in late antique synagogues, and there is no reason to expect inscriptions identifying the use of a particular room or area.⁷⁶ The reality is that barring inscriptions,

72. See Stephan T.A.M. Mols, *Wooden Furniture in Herculaneum: Form, Technique and Function* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1999), 2.

73. In her discussion of archaeological evidence of galleries, Bernadette Brooten writes, 'one could begin reconstructing wooden galleries with wooden staircases, but this seems highly speculative...': Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as n. 3), 122. Although she is correct that it is unlikely entire galleries and staircases made of wood existed in all ancient synagogues, wooden room dividers are less difficult to imagine.

74. See Katharina Galor, 'Domestic Architecture in Roman and Byzantine Galilee and Golan', *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66 (2003), 56.

75. Although, even with an inscription one must consider the possibility that the inscription was added after the area was created and that the purpose of the area therefore changed over time. It is also possible that the area may have only been used for certain types of worship (see discussion of Water Drawing Ceremony above).

76. The modern situation is instructive in this regard: although women's sections in synagogues are implicitly known by congregants, they are rarely explicitly identified with external markers. Often the only way to determine where men and women sit is by observing the congregants. I thank Steve Werlin for pointing out this analogy to me (personal communication).

archaeology cannot determine where people of a particular gender sat. All archaeologists can do is identify separate seating areas, at which point the evidence must be interpreted.⁷⁷

Ancient church and Graeco-Roman seating practices

In the conclusion to her study of women's sections in ancient synagogues Brooten dismisses using separate seating in ancient churches as parallels for ancient synagogue practices because 'the development of the arrangement of the sexes was uneven and regionally influenced'. Therefore, she argues that 'earliest Christianity does not seem to have had a separation of the sexes'.⁷⁸ This dismissal of the parallel evidence misses the point: earliest Christianity did have a separation of the sexes in churches, but like Judaism, the evidence of the practice is not universal, but instead suggests local variation. This section discusses some of the evidence of separate seating in non-Jewish settings that may have influenced, or been influenced by Jewish practices.

Already in the second and third century CE, the church father Tertullian in his *On the Veiling of Virgins* suggests that unlike men, women had no active role in leading church worship.⁷⁹ Sharon Lea Mattila argues that this passage may also suggest that there was separate seating in churches,⁸⁰ although the passage itself is not explicit in this regard. More explicitly, the third-century *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (18), written in Rome, suggests that women should be separated from men during times of prayer.⁸¹ And in the fourth-century *Constitution of the Holy Apostles*, a text that purports to set regulations for Christian behaviour, the separation of men and women in a church setting is explicitly described (*Const. ap. 2. 57*).⁸² Finally, in the late fourth century, John Chrysostom's homily on the Gospel of Matthew explicitly

77. Brooten made this important point as well. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, 104.

78. *Ibid.* 138.

79. Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 9: 2–3.

80. Mattila, "Where Women Sat" (as in n. 19), 279.

81. An example of the effects of the scholarly consensus on separate seating in ancient synagogues can be seen in Paul Bradshaw's recent commentary on the text, which compares the separation of men and women during early Christian prayer with that of the ancient synagogue where there was no separation of men and women. Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN.: Fortress Press, 2002), 99.

82. See Ross Kraemer (ed.), *Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons, Monastics: A Sourcebook on Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 241, 408. The precise dating of this text is unknown.

suggests that there were wooden dividers used to separate men and women in his congregation in Constantinople (*Hom. Matt.* 73).⁸³ While Chrysostom claims to have heard that the practice of separating the sexes in church was unknown to the earliest Christians, there is no reason to suggest that it was a completely new or unusual practice in fourth-century church settings.⁸⁴

Moving into the sixth century, references to churches with separate seating become more common. The Greek rhetorician Choricus of Gaza writes that there was a church in Gaza with a women's gallery,⁸⁵ and late-sixth-century evidence of a women's section in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople is found in the writing of Paul the Silentary, who refers to the women's gallery [*thēluterō huperōia*], the women's place [*gunaikeion*], and the women's ambulatory [*thēluterē aithusa*].⁸⁶ Further evidence specifically for the Hagia Sophia can be found in the sixth century writings of Procopius, who writes that 'one of these two colonnaded stoas has been assigned to men worshippers, while the other is reserved for women engaged in the same exercise' (*Buildings* I, 1, 55–58).⁸⁷

In addition to the separation of men and women in churches, it should also be pointed out that there is evidence of the separation of men and women in Graeco-Roman theatres and arenas.⁸⁸ Christian and Graeco-Roman examples of separate seating do not prove anything about synagogues, but as Ross Kraemer points out, 'if the seating in ancient synagogues was gender-segregated', then it 'was hardly unique to Judaism'.⁸⁹

83. See John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Matthaem* 73. 3, in *Patrologiae Cursus, series Graeca* (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1857–87), 58. 677.

84. *Contra* Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 135, 261 n. 171. William Horbury, on the other hand, uses this passage to argue that there was still separation of men and women amongst the earliest Christians, but that they did not need a barrier. Horbury, 'Women in the Synagogue' (as in n. 19), 373.

85. *Choricii Gazaei Orationes Declamationes Fragmenta*, ed. Jean François Boissonade (apud Dumont, 1846), 117. See also Brooten, *Women Leaders* (as in n. 3), 261 n. 168.

86. *Descr. S. Sophiae*, lines 389, 562, 587. See Paulus Silentarius, 'Descriptio Ecclesiae Sanctae Sophiae Et Ambonis', in *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentarius*, ed. Paul Friedländer (Leipzig: Kunstbeschreibungen justinianischer Zeit, 1912), 238, 43, 44. See also Thomas F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park, PA: Penn. State University Press, 1971), 130.

87. See Procopius, 'On Buildings', tr. H. B. Dewing with Glanville Downey, (Loeb Classical Library, 1940), 25–27. The location of women in Hagia Sophia, however, is not absolutely certain, since there are competing descriptions. See Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy*, 132–33.

88. For example, see Suetonius, *Augustus*, 44–45, and *Acts of Thecla*, 32. See also Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 107; Mattila, 'Where Women Sat' (as in n. 19), 276–82.

89. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 106–7. William Horbury argues that the separation of

Conclusion

This brief survey of some of the literary, archaeological, and cultural evidence suggests that the question of separate seating in ancient synagogues is complex. While there is no evidence of universal seat-separation in ancient synagogues, there is certainly evidence that some Jewish communities separated men and women, or at least wrote about separating them in worship settings. Philo provides explicit evidence of separating men and women in one first-century worship setting,⁹⁰ and the evidence from the rabbinic and early Christian sources suggests that the idea of separating men and women in worship and other settings was a continuous part of the cultural milieu in late antiquity. And while most ancient synagogue buildings do not have evidence of separate seating areas, there are some that do, and these can legitimately be interpreted as evidence of separating men and women. Yet, the evidence is clearly not strong enough to claim that *all* ancient synagogues separated men and women during worship. Indeed, there is literary evidence that suggests some synagogues did not separate men and women, and other literary evidence that is ambiguous enough to allow for competing interpretations. As for the archaeological evidence, most of the remains of synagogue buildings do not include separate seating areas,⁹¹ and even where there is evidence of separate seating areas, competing interpretations are possible.

Ultimately, my argument is methodological: universal claims about separate seating in ancient synagogues present a false impression about the state of the evidence. Some of the evidence suggests separate seating was practised in particular communities, while other evidence suggests that separate seating may not have been practised in other communities.⁹² Most of the evidence,

men and women in Christian settings combined with evidence of similar Graeco-Roman practice suggests that 'Jewish custom is likely to have been similar': Horbury, 'Women in the Synagogue' (as in n. 19), 374. However, he extrapolates the few pieces of literary evidence into universal claims that men and women were typically separated in both synagogues and churches.

90. Although the evidence is only explicit with the *Therapeutae*, I have argued that Philo never claims that they are the only community to separate men and women during worship, but that he rather emphasizes their method of separation.

91. See Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 475–76. Of course, the discussion about archaeological evidence above warns against drawing absolute conclusions based on the absence of archaeological evidence.

92. We must keep in mind that everything we know about ancient synagogues suggests that they were diverse in terms of appearance and practice. See *ibid.* 604. In a recent article Martin Goodman has similarly argued that there is no reason to think that Judaism became uniform in practice after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Goodman, 'Religious Variety and the Temple in the Late Second Temple Period and Its Aftermath'. That some of these Jewish groups or synagogue

however, does not specifically address the question of separate seating and allows for competing interpretations. Therefore, the evidence does not allow for a single answer to the question of separate seating for all synagogues, but rather forces us to consider the question on a case-by-case basis.⁹³ Claims that all ancient synagogues separated men and women,⁹⁴ and claims that all ancient synagogues did not separate men and women, equally go beyond the evidence. It is therefore time that seating practices, both with and without the separation of men and women, are added to our descriptions of ‘exuberantly diverse’ ancient synagogues.⁹⁵

communities separated men and women during worship should be expected based on the extant evidence. That communities that separated men and women during worship used the synagogue buildings archaeologists have excavated is certainly possible, even though this cannot be proved beyond a reasonable doubt.

93. For example, the evidence clearly suggests that the *Therapeutae* separated men and women during worship, while the evidence suggests that the synagogue described in Luke 13:10–17 did not. The only way to determine an answer for all synagogues is to gather explicit evidence of every literarily and archaeologically identified ancient synagogue. This much explicit evidence is the historical ideal, but is also a fantasy. In this regard, Tal Ilan is mistaken when she suggests that ‘concrete evidence for the existence of a distinct women’s section in the synagogue would end this debate’: Ilan, ‘Women in Jewish Life and Law’ (as in n. 33), 639. To the contrary, such evidence would only prove that men and women were separated in that particular synagogue.

94. See Mattila, ‘Where Women Sat’ (as in n. 19); Horbury, ‘Women in the Synagogue’ (as in n. 19).

95. See Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 604.