

Early Christian Women in Leadership Positions: The Testimony of Grave Inscriptions

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The epigraphs from antiquity and from the early Middle Ages are still to a great extent an unlocked treasury for women's and gender history.¹ These historical sources are highly significant—just like the documentary papyri, ostraca, and wooden and wax tablets—because they, in contrast to literary sources, offer at first hand special insights into the daily lives of ancient people. These sources are valuable reference bases also in regard to the understanding of the New Testament, as shown by the first annotated source editions of epigraphs, documentary papyri, and ostraca in connection with the New Testament presented by Adolf Deissmann in his works *Bibelstudien* (1895) and *Licht vom Osten* (first edition 1908).² This meritorious approach taken by Deissmann was not continued systematically until the 1970s, by Gregory H. R. Horsley in the outstanding series *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*. Before the creation of these corpora, the inscriptions were not readily accessible to broader research, which is undoubtedly the reason why they were included within New Testament scholarship relatively late. However, this does not explain why *mainstream* New Testament scholarship has paid so little attention to these significant sources.³ A commendable step in the analysis of early Christian

1. On the relevance of the epigraphs for women's and gender history, see below in detail in section 1.

2. Adolf Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt*, 4th rev. ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923); Deissmann, *Bibelstudien: Beiträge, zumeist aus den Papyri und Inschriften zur Geschichte der Sprache, des Schrifttums und der Religion des hellenistischen Judentums und des Urchristentums* (repr., Hildesheim: Olms, 1977).

3. This is less true for the documentary papyri, ostraca, and wooden and wax

epigraphs is taken by the project *Inscriptiones Christianae Graecae* (ICG). Since 2008, it has developed a freely accessible database of early Christian epigraphs from Asia Minor and Greece from the time period between the second and the sixth century.⁴

In the present volume of the series *Bible and Women*, my task is to inquire about the reception of New Testament women in the inscriptions. It should be noted that explicit Bible citations occur in inscriptions only after the Constantinian turn.⁵ Antonio Enrico Felle has offered a first collection of inscriptions with biblical citations. According to him, the Old Testament is cited much more frequently than the New Testament in these inscriptions.⁶

The character of these sources is also probably the reason for their neglect in New Testament research. There is a myriad of inscriptions, which are widely disseminated and of various genres, and they are found on the most diverse array of writing surfaces—for example, stone, bronze tablets, walls of houses, and broken potsherds.⁷ They are often damaged and fragmentary, which complicates the reconstruction of the text. In

tablets, since the project *Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament* has been in operation for almost a quarter-century. However, it was only in 2014 that the project *Epigraphische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament* was started at a conference in Vienna. See Peter Arzt-Grabner, “Die Auswertung inschriftlicher Zeugnisse für die neutestamentliche Exegese: Erfahrungen, Chancen und Herausforderungen,” in *Epigraphik und Neues Testament*, ed. Thomas Corsten, Markus Öhler, and Joseph Verheyden, WUNT 365 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 27. The volume offers a first contribution to the project. A second volume with individual studies that deals with the letters to the Colossians is being prepared by Joseph Verheyden, according to information from Markus Öhler.

4. Cilliers Breytenbach et al., eds., *Inscriptiones Christianae Graecae* (ICG): A Digital Collection of Greek Early Christian Inscriptions from Asia Minor and Greece (Berlin: Edition Topoi, 2016), <http://repository.edition-topoi.org/collection/ICG>.

5. So Walter Ameling, “Neues Testament und Epigraphik aus der Perspektive der epigraphischen Forschung,” in *Epigraphik und Neues Testament*, 7.

6. See the statistics compiled by Antonio Enrico Felle, *Biblia Epigraphica: La Sacra Scrittura nella Documentazione Epigrafica dell’Orbis Christianus Antiquus (III–VIII Secolo)*, ICIS 5 (Bari: Edipuglia, 2006), 412–25. The inscription concerning the deaconess Maria, with two Bible citations, treated below, is lacking in this collection.

7. See Eva Ebel, “Epigraphik (NT),” in *WiBiLex* (2009), <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6010d>. See Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 18–20.

addition, there are further difficulties with deciphering the text, for many of them are written in *lectio continua* without separation of words or sentences, and contain abbreviations to save space. The texts are frequently short, schematic, and formulated in the vernacular. Dating is only vaguely possible, insofar as the inscriptions themselves contain no dating of their own. To make matters worse, the edited sources are often found in confusing inscription corpora or are scattered, frequently without accompanying translation, in a large number of individual publications that are difficult to survey. Thus, the analysis and assessment of these historical sources demands special skills and knowledge of languages. However, these sources are becoming more accessible, of which the database *Inscriptiones Christianae Graece* is only one example. Also, one of the most important instruments for analyzing epigraphic sources—the *Guide de l'épigraphiste* in its most current edition—is already available in open access.⁸

In the following, I will first deal with the relevance of the inscriptions for women's and gender history, then analyze two selected inscriptions for deaconesses, through which I treat the question of the reception of the women in the New Testament. A summarizing résumé follows in conclusion.

1. The Relevance of Inscriptions for Women's and Gender History

The investigation of epigraphical sources has shown how insightful inscriptions are for understanding daily life in antiquity and, in this connection, for the reconstruction of women's and gender history. In contrast to literary sources that in many cases reflect androcentric and patriarchal culture, inscriptions give an undogmatic point of view of the lives of ancient people.

Research on Latin and Greek inscriptions from antiquity has shown that women held responsibility in economic matters, politics, religion, and society.⁹ In the area of economics, women come up in inscriptions as active in numerous professions, which shows that they had economic independence. In addition, there were some women who were well-to-do

8. François Bérard et al., *Guide de l'épigraphiste: Bibliographie choisie des épigraphies antiques et médiévales*, GIBBENS 7 (Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, Quatrième édition entièrement refondue, 2010), <http://www.antiquite.ens.fr/ressources/publications-aux-p-e-n-s/guide-de-l-epigraphiste/article/overview>.

9. On the following, and with bibliographic sources, see Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 15–18.

for other reasons. Both groups also appear in the New Testament. Among women who were employed or had a profession were, for example, Lydia, the purple merchant and head of household in Philippi (Acts 16), the tent-maker Prisca in Corinth (Acts 18:3), and the sewer Tabitha in Joppa (Acts 9:36–41).¹⁰ These women can be considered owners of small businesses. Well-to-do women, who acted independently, are mentioned in Luke 8:3. This probably applies also to the deacon and patron Phoebe of Cenchreae (Rom 16:1–2). These findings clearly contradict the still-prevailing patriarchal model that reduces women to the sphere of home and makes them economically dependent on fathers or husbands. Such a simplistic perspective overlooks the fact that the social reality of ancient women was shaped by the same varied factors as that of men and, for this reason, should be equally nuanced.

The situation is similar in the spheres of politics and religion. Epigraphic, papyrological, and numismatic research has been able to show that women in Asia Minor assumed responsibilities in liturgy and in municipal administration.¹¹ Inscriptions also offer outstanding proofs that women exercised offices in religious communities. For example, Joan Breton has demonstrated this regarding priestesses in ancient Greece, Bernadette Brooten regarding Jewish women in the ancient synagogue, and Ute E. Eisen regarding Christian women in the first century.¹²

Moreover, women had also other social roles than just that of a virgin daughter, wife, or widow, as the patriarchal theory indicates. Their lives were clearly more varied. The Greek concept *χήρα* (widow) and its Latin counterpart, *vidua*, already show this, for it designated every “woman living without a man.”¹³ The concept was not restricted to women who had lost their husbands, as commonly maintained, but all women who were widowed, divorced, or not married could be designated with it. The life of women in antiquity was constructed in a manner similar to that of

10. On the women in Acts, see the sociohistorical study by Ivoni Richter-Reimer, *Frauen in der Apostelgeschichte des Lukas: Eine feministisch-theologische Exegese* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1992).

11. For more information, see Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 16.

12. See Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, BJS 36 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982); Eisen, *Women Officeholders*.

13. So Gustav Stählin, “*χήρα*,” *TWNT* 9:429; Theodor Mayer-Maly, “*vidua*” *PW* 2/16:2098.

men. Thus, women lived with or without children, were unmarried, widowed, divorced (1 Cor 7:8–16, 25–40; cf. Mark 10:2–12 par.), or lived in same-sex partnerships (Phil 4:2–3). They could practice their sexuality or not (1 Cor 7:1–7).¹⁴ The evidence of the inscriptions confirm the diversity of relational configurations and life plans of women.

Women also appear as self-assured protagonists, as shown in the self-representations in the inscriptions. As an example, I would like to cite the inscription of the deaconess Basilissa from Asia Minor. The text of the inscription reads: “The first man of the village, Quintus, the son of Heraclius, with his wife Matrona and his children Anicetus and Catilla, all lie here in this grave. The spouse of Anicetus, the Deaconess Basilissa, has erected this pleasing grave along with her only son Numitorius, who is still an underage child.”¹⁵ The deaconess Basilissa behaves self-assuredly by erecting this gravestone for the family of her deceased husband. She mentions first of all the social position of her father-in-law (“the first man of the village”), which has a direct effect on her own self-representation. In addition, she presents her own official title, *διάκονος*, and immortalizes herself as the mother of an underage child. This also indicates that this woman must still have been relatively young, or at most in middle age. She was evidently the wife of Anicetus, who had died. As a rule, though, the ancient sources do not reveal concretely how individual women and men lived. For example, did the New Testament Lydia live as an unmarried or divorced woman, or had she lost her husband through death? Did she have children? We do not know, but we can see that she was professionally employed and the head of her own household, and thus economically independent, which is certainly also true for Nympha (Col 4:15) and some other New Testament women.

In terms of the self-representation of women in inscriptions, one funerary epigram stands out from the abundance of inscriptions by and for deaconesses in Asia Minor. It also gives some indication of the education of women. The deaconess Paula dedicated an ambitious funerary epigram in hexameter to her brother Helladius: “Paula, the most blessed deaconess of Christ ... She built me, this grave for her dear brother Helladius, outside the Fatherland, built of stones as the guardian of the body until the terrible sounding trumpet awakes the mortal beings upon the command

14. On this, see Bernadette Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

15. See, in more detail, Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 167–68.

of God.”¹⁶ The deaconess drafted the funerary epigram not only in hexameter but also artistically as the speech of the gravestone itself. She also inserted an allusion to 1 Cor 15:52. Although this inscription stands out clearly from others in this region, it is proof that women could be educated and acted with self-confidence. In the light of such women, it is no longer so surprising that the New Testament Prisca, for example, is mentioned as a rule before her husband Aquila (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3; Acts 18; 1 Tim 4:19). This indicates that the relationship between spouses could be termed individually. The traditions prohibiting women (such as 1 Cor 14:33b–36; 1 Tim 2:11–15) can also be read as evidence for this. Prisca was a tentmaker and worked as such together with her husband and Paul (1 Cor 16:19). In addition to this, Acts speaks about her teaching activity (Acts 18:26).¹⁷

In sum, speech about “the woman” in antiquity and the monolithic image of women accompanying it should be finally dismissed as an inappropriate reduction of the complex reality. The intersectional approach has made it clear that various intersecting factors mark the reality of individuals, also in the ancient world.¹⁸ The above examples should have sufficiently illuminated this,¹⁹ and also that the inclusion of inscriptions—as well as all other ancient sources that are not counted as literature—seems suitable for demonstrating how incompatible the patriarchal concepts of femininity are with the actual everyday reality of women in antiquity.

2. New Testament Women in the Witness of the Epigraphs

2.1 Method of Procedure: The Intertextuality Paradigm

Intertextuality applies to the study of the reception of the New Testament in epigraphic texts. New Testament references, in the form of citations or

16. On this and the following, see Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 169–70.

17. On the epigraphical witness of teaching women, see Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 169–70.

18. See Ute E. Eisen, Christine Gerber, and Angela Standhartinger, “Doing Gender—Doing Religion: Zur Frage nach der Intersektionalität in den Bibelwissenschaften. Eine Einleitung,” in *Doing Gender—Doing Religion: Fallstudien zur Intersektionalität im frühen Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, ed. Ute E. Eisen, Christine Gerber, and Angela Standhartinger, WUNT 302 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1–33, and the further essays in the volume.

19. For further reflections, see Ute E. Eisen, “Frauen in leitenden Positionen im Neuen Testament und in der frühen Kirche,” *BK* 65 (2010): 207–9.

allusions, can be analyzed, described, and interpreted systematically and most precisely with the instruments developed in intertextuality research. In the following, I refer to the analytical instruments systematized by Gunna Lampe, which she has developed within the framework of her study on the comparison of apocalyptic miracle narratives with those of the New Testament.²⁰

Intertextuality can be defined as an analysis of the interaction of texts but also, in the reception-aesthetic perspective, of the interaction between the text and the readers. Thus, the first thing to do is to inquire about the mutual textual reference, and then about the interaction between the text and those reading it. According to Lampe, the recipients together with the potential inherent in the text determine the intertextual constitution of the text.²¹

In intertextual comparison, the first step is to differentiate between the source text and the comparison text. In this essay, the inscriptions form the source text and the New Testament the comparison text. In the following, I will shortly present those steps of the intertextual analysis that Lampe has systematized that are relevant in dealing with the selected inscriptions.

First, one must inquire about the “kind of intertextual marking,” that is, whether it is a quotation or an allusion. In the case of quotations, the next step is to examine their intensity, whereby the possibilities are on a scale between “total and unchanged” to “partial and modified.” In the case of allusions, it is relevant to analyze to what they refer, for example, to names (“onomastic”), motifs (“motivic”), or distinguishing features that are specific to the text genre and thereby are structurally formative (“structural”).²²

Second, the “degree of intertextual markedness” needs to be addressed, for this can take on different intensities. Lampe names the five basic forms as “unmarked” (zero level), “implicit” (reduction level), “quasi-explicit,” “explicit” (full level), and “maximally marked” (potentiation level).²³

Third, it can be useful to ask about the possible reference points of the source text. Here the fundamental distinction is between a single text

20. See Gunna Lampe, “So anders? Die Wundertätigkeit Jesu im Kindheitsevan- gelium des Thomas: Eine intertextuelle Untersuchung zur Darstellung der Wunder- taten und des Wundertäters in den Paidika” (PhD diss., Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, 2019), <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6010e>.

21. Lampe, “So anders?” 118.

22. Lampe, “So anders?” 120–26.

23. Lampe, “So anders?” 126–29.

reference, which merely refers to a single text, and a systematic reference, which bears on one or more text genres, structural similarities, or discourse types.²⁴

Fourth, there is the subsequent question about the “impact strategies of intertextuality” and their “functions,” which Lampe determines more exactly in her “model of reciprocal determination of the function of intertextual references.” She assumes four basic strategies. The functions in the source text and in the comparison text correspond to these strategies. First, the “affirmative” strategy, which accentuates the similarity between the source texts and the comparison texts and, in terms of the source text, fulfills the function of “legitimation” and, in the comparison text, that of “glorification.” Second, the “neutral” strategy fulfills the function of “demonstration” in the source text, and in the comparison text that of “verification.” The third, “critical” strategy, accentuates controversial aspects, such as contrast, and fulfills the function of “revision” in the source text and that of “degradation” in the comparison text. The fourth one is the “modifying” strategy, which takes over the function of “modification” in the source text and that of “differentiation” in the comparison text.²⁵

Finally, the aspect of reception needs to be considered, since there are model readers inherent in texts to whom intertextuality is disclosed. Thus, intertextuality can develop its impact only when the model readers encounter informed readers who are familiar with the encyclopedia of the texts.²⁶ Reader concepts have been given various names in research. Umberto Eco speaks about the “model reader” and defines them as an “interplay of *fortunate circumstances* that have been laid down in the text and that must be satisfying, so that a text can be actualized completely in its possible content.”²⁷ This reader concept requires a “competence for (recognizing) allusions,” as Annette Merz defines it.²⁸ Without this

24. Lampe, “So anders?,” 129–33.

25. Lampe, “So anders?,” 140–47.

26. Lampe, “So anders?,” 147–48.

27. Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, trans. Heinz-Georg Held (Munich: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1987), 76. Eco’s work is not fully available in English translation.

28. Annette Merz, *Die fiktive Selbstausslegung des Paulus: Intertextuelle Studien zur Intention und Rezeption der Pastoralbriefe*, NTOA 52 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 64.

competence the horizon of meaning disclosed by intertextuality in the act of reception remains unrecognized.

2.2. The Inscription of the *Diakonos* Sophia from Palestine (Fourth–Seventh Centuries)

A gravestone found on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, but transported there probably from Beersheba, speaks of the deaconess Sophia.²⁹ The gravestone is a marble slab broken into five pieces. The dating given to it in epigraphic research varies between the second half of the fourth century and the seventh century. In the inscription, Sophia is described more exactly as *διάκονος* and as a “second Phoebe,” which is a clear allusion to the New Testament *διάκονος* Phoebe from Rom 16:7 for informed readers. The text of the preserved part of the inscription runs as follows:³⁰

+ ἐνθάδε κίται ἡ δούλη
καὶ νύμφη τοῦ Χριστοῦ
Σοφία, ἡ διάκονος, ἡ δευ-
τέρα Φοίβη, κοιμηθῆσα
ἐν ἰρήνῃ τῇ κα’ τοῦ Μαρ-
τίου μηνὸς Ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ια’
[...]θίτω κύριος ὁ Θεός
[- - - - -]ισων πρεσ-

Crux immissa Here lies the slave
and bride of Christ,
Sophia, diakonos, the second
Phoebe, who fell asleep
in peace on the 21st of the month of
March during the 11th indication
[...] the Lord God
[- - - - -]ison pres-

The inscription is found, along with others, in a collection of inscriptions from Jerusalem and Palestine (IJerusalem 130). Within this collection, five

29. On this and the following inscription, see Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 158–60.

30. Text and translation by Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 159. English Bible translations follow the NRSV.

inscriptions witness to six *διάκονοι* in all (see IJerusalem 119, 130, 147, 166, 167). Three of them are identifiable by name as men, and two as women—the second woman along with Sophia is identifiable by means of the feminine form *διακονισ*[...], which surely has not been totally preserved (IJerusalem 119) but which is suggested by the preserved sigma. The feminine form *διακόνισσα* next to *διάκονος* has not been detected before the fourth century. In the following centuries, though, it did not completely replace the use of *διάκονος*, but rather both designations are encountered as synonyms.³¹ The gender of the sixth person in the collection cannot be determined since only the abbreviation *διακ*, without the mention of a name, has been preserved (IJerusalem 176a). The functional title *διάκονος* is abbreviated four times in all of these six inscriptions—three times with *διακ* (IJerusalem 147, 167) and once with *δκο* (IJerusalem 166). The titles are (or were) written out only in the inscription for Sophia and in the already mentioned damaged inscription. The inscription for Sophia is the most detailed of the five deaconess inscriptions in this collection.

First, it is important to note that also women were given the title *διάκονος*, for which Paul is the oldest witness (Rom 16:1–2). This applies also to the further history of Christianity, and women probably exercised the functions related to it. It is essential to bear in mind that this title expressed something else in early Christianity than what we today normally associate with it. In his seminal study *Diakonia*, John N. Collins completely revised the conceptual field.³² He showed that *διακονία* describes a communicative and mediatory function that includes a commissioner. Paul's use of this conceptual field shows that these observations correspond to the Pauline letters. Paul frequently uses *διάκονος* along with *ἀπόστολος* as a title—above all as a self-designation.³³ *Διακονία* means in Paul's usage the commissioning of a person with the task of proclaiming the word of reconciliation. The male or female *διάκονος* is in a way a “bearer

31. The oldest instance of *diakonissa* is found in canon 19 of the Acts of the Council of Nicaea. See on this and similar use Eisen, *Officeholders*, 14.

32. John Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). On the history of research, see Anni Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament: Studien zur Semantik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle der Frauen*, WUNT 2/226 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 11–24.

33. See on this in detail, with necessary nuances, Christine Gerber, *Paulus und seine “Kinder”: Studien zur Beziehungsmetaphorik der paulinischen Briefe*, BZNW 136 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 131–42.

of the offer of reconciliation in the sense of Hellenistic peace diplomacy,³⁴ who is dependent on God as the commissioner (2 Cor 5:18–19). Only in the nineteenth century was the conceptual field restricted to charitable activities.³⁵ The development of an early Christian office of deacon or deaconess had a varied and regionally different history. In many texts, it remains unclear which exact functions related to this office in each case. The same applies to other ecclesiastical offices, as can already be observed in the Pastoral Letters (1 Tim 3:1–13).

Women are clearly documented as deacons in the first Christian centuries in numerous recorded literary and epigraphic witnesses.³⁶ This fact correlates with attempts to force women out of congregational leadership positions, as already shown in the New Testament in the command directed to women to keep silence in 1 Cor 14:33b–36. Whether this statement originates with Paul or is a later interpolation (for which there is some evidence) cannot be determined.³⁷ However, it is certain that the authors of the Pastoral Letters wanted to force women out of leadership positions.³⁸ This becomes especially clear in the categorical prohibition on teaching, with the demand for subordination, in 1 Tim 2:9–15. This authoritarian stance taken by the authors toward women continues in the tendency of the letters to restrict the leadership positions occupied by women and to make them invisible. This becomes especially evident in the

34. So Gerber, *Paulus und seine "Kinder,"* 138.

35. See, e.g., Hans-Jürgen Benedict, "Beruht der Anspruch der evangelischen Diakonie auf einer Missinterpretation der antiken Quellen? John N. Collins Untersuchung 'Diakonia,'" in *Studienbuch Diakonie 1: Biblische, historische und theologische Zugänge zur Diakonie*, ed. Volker Herrmann and Martin Horstmann (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008), 117–33.

36. A detailed discussion of epigraphic sources is offered by Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 158–98; see also Anne Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women* (Louisville: John Knox, 1996), 58–80.

37. On the arguments, see Marlene Crüsemann, "Unrettbar frauenfeindlich: Der Kampf um das Wort von Frauen in 1. Kor 14, 34–35 im Spiegel antijudaistischer Elemente der Auslegung," in *Paulus: Umstrittene Traditionen—Lebendige Theologie: Eine feministische Lektüre*, ed. Claudia Janssen, Luise Schottroff, and Beate Wehn (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001), 23–43.

38. See, in detail, Ulrike Wagoner, *Die Ordnung des "Hauses Gottes": Der Ort von Frauen in der Ekklesiologie der Pastoralbriefe*, WUNT 2/65 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994); and Wagoner., "(Un-)Ordnung im Haushalt Gottes? Wie Schüler des Paulus die Freiheit ihrer Glaubensschwestern bekämpfen," *BK* 65 (2010): 223–27.

range of offices for the *διάκονοι*, but also in the case of the office of widow.³⁹ That women too were active as *διάκονοι* is disguised almost totally in the roster of deacons and deaconesses (see 1 Tim 3:8–13).⁴⁰ Ulrike Wagener comments on this, stating that “the writers for the congregations of the third generation” attempted “to curb the activities of women and to establish a certain image of the Church,” namely, the “Church as a patriarchal ‘Household of God.’”⁴¹

But back to the inscription for the deaconess Sophia. She is characterized with two conceptual pairs, “servant and bride of Christ” and “deaconess, the second Phoebe.” Both are New Testament allusions.

First, the characterization of Sophia with the expression *δούλη ... Χριστοῦ* forms a quasi-explicit allusion to the name, frequently imposed by oneself or by others in the New Testament epistolary literature of prominent early Christian missionaries of both sexes as *δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ* (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; Col 4:12; Jude 1:1; and others). Paul reserves the metaphor for himself and Timothy and thereby expresses his relationship to God as well as his particular commission.⁴² Paul’s use is influenced by the Old Testament honorific titles “given to such specially chosen and extraordinary characters as Moses, David, and others.... The designation expresses for Paul not only a relationship of service, but is also a title of office and an honorific description.”⁴³ The interpretation of Sophia’s characterization as “servant and bride of Christ” in the same sense seems obvious.

This allusion is amplified through the additional allusion to the Pauline letters: an explicit textual reference to Rom 16:1. Through the characterization as a second Phoebe, Sophia is placed in relation to a prominent woman of the New Testament who occupied a leadership position, namely, the *διάκονος* Phoebe from Cenchreae praised by Paul. This allusion is explicit insofar as the title *διάκονος* along with the name Phoebe in combination with the epithet “second” is attached to Sophia, a procedure that clearly refers to the New Testament Phoebe. In Rom 16:1, Paul writes about Phoebe in the following way: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon [*διάκονος*] of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in what-

39. On the widow’s office, see below under 2.3.1.

40. See on this in more detail Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament*, 396–404.

41. Wagener, “(Un-)Ordnung im Haushalt Gottes?,” 223.

42. See Gerber, *Paulus und seine “Kinder,”* 145–46.

43. Alfons Weiser, “*δουλύεω κτλ.*,” *EDNT* 1:352.

ever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor [προστάτις] of many and of myself as well.”⁴⁴ Among informed readers, the allusions evoke a correlation of the inscription with the list of those greeted in the letter to the congregation at Rome (Rom 16:1–16), a list that Paul begins with the recommendation for Phoebe cited above (vv. 1–2). This generates associations between this significant woman in the New Testament and the Jerusalem Sophia of the fourth to the seventh century.⁴⁵

According to Rom 16:1–2, Phoebe is a fellow Christian (ἀδελφή) and a deacon (διάκονος) of the congregation in the Corinthian harbor city of Cenchreae. She has journeyed to Rome, obviously also to deliver Paul’s letter to the congregation there. Paul gives Phoebe not only the title of διάκονος, but also that of προστάτις (female benefactor, patron), which indicates that she is a woman of upper social status and of property. The designation προστάτις, as well as πάτρων (Latin *patronus*), has to do with the patronage system of the ancient Mediterranean society and thus points to the social system and its actors.⁴⁶ Male and female patrons performed various services in the support of their clientele, such as the provision of legal counsel and of shelter, food, and clothing (social care). Phoebe was a woman with status and property, and she obviously acted solely on her own account, for, in the letter of recommendation, she appears alone. We do not know what exactly made her to take this journey: Was she an envoy from the congregation at Cenchreae? Was she commissioned to deliver Paul’s letter? Did she act as a supporter of Paul’s mission to Spain? Did she travel out of economic interest? Or did she combine various functions with her trip to Rome? Evident is merely that she possessed a prominent position in the congregation at Cenchreae and its missionary work, and that Paul belonged to her clientele too.

The name Phoebe, originating in Greek mythology, suggests that her origin may have been in the slave class. If so, then she would have accomplished something special in accumulating considerable property and social status. However, Paul not only praises Phoebe but also emphasizes other women in his list of greetings, such as Prisca (Rom 16:3) and the

44. All the translations from the Greek in the following are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

45. See Annette Merz, “Phöbe von Kenchreä: Kollegin und Patronin des Paulus,” *BK* 65 (2010): 228–32.

46. See on this and on the following, with further bibliography, Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 160, 187 nn. 13–15.

ἀπόστολος Junia (Rom 16:7).⁴⁷ This Pauline list of greetings in the New Testament shows that women in extraordinary abundance occupied leadership positions and were recognized in them, as Paul confirms.

The possible associations that these allusions elicit among informed readers are therefore diverse. The deaconess Sophia is dignified quite especially in that she is linked to the tradition of this famous woman (and these famous women) and companion(s) of Paul. The female and male readers of the inscription are invited to interpret the women reciprocally. The impact strategy of this allusion is affirmative, since the correlation in the inscription with Phoebe in the Pauline letter of recommendation legitimizes Sophia's position. Constructive and legitimizing functions are thereby attributed to this New Testament allusion within the inscription. It augments its reading with positive associations and lends Sophia an outstanding significance with only a few words. Through the reference to this significant woman of the New Testament, Sophia's impact is legitimized and made prominent retrospectively in a special way. However, there is even more; the text of the inscription brings to mind not only Sophia, but also at the same time Phoebe, as an important theologian, contemporary to and companion of Paul. Thus, both women are legitimized and portrayed reciprocally—Phoebe in retrospect and Sophia as her successor. With the affirmative allusion to a female figure of the New Testament, a reciprocal process of emphasis, recognition, and realization occurs in the inscription.

2.3. The Inscription of the Deaconess Maria from Cappadocia (Sixth Century)

A magnificently embellished sepulchral stela in gray marble from the sixth century from Cappadocia in Asia Minor provides evidence for the deacon Maria.⁴⁸ The sepulchral stela is made in Provençal style and furnished with a Constantinopolitan ornamentation.⁴⁹ In the inscription for Maria there are two citations from the New Testament.

47. That Junia is a woman is now accepted in research. See Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

48. On this inscription in more detail, see Eisen, *Women Office holders*, 164–67.

49. Nicole Thierry offers a more detailed description on the basis of the history of art. See Thierry, "Un problème de continuité ou de rupture: La Cappadoce entre Rome, Byzance et les Arabes," *CRAI* (1977): 116.

First of all, it should be noted that the deaconess (διάκονος) Maria mentioned on the sepulchral stela is part of a wealth of epigraphic evidence for female διάκονοι in Asia Minor.⁵⁰ Here, too, we encounter διάκονος completely as a matter of course next to the feminine form διακόνησσα. The range of tasks performed by διάκονοι are, as a rule, not enumerated in the inscriptions from Asia Minor. The concrete details of the scope of activities of this deaconess thus form an exception.

The first citation is marked as such and refers to Paul's (pseudepigraphical) first letter to Timothy (1 Tim 5:10b). The second citation comes from Luke 23:42 and is not marked. Both citations are modified. In the following, three texts are offered synoptically: the inscription as source text and the two New Testament texts as comparison texts. Literal agreement between the Greek texts and their translations are underlined:

Inscription	Intertextuality and New Testament Citation
Here lies the deacon [διάκονος] Maria of pious and blessed memory,	
who according to the words of the apostle	explicit marking of intertextuality (full level)
<u>reared children</u> [ἐτεκνοτρόφησεν],	total, modified citation from 1 Tim 5:10b: [...] since she <u>reared children</u> [εἰ ἐτεκνοτρόφησεν],
<u>sheltered guests</u> [ἐξενεδόχησεν],	since she <u>sheltered guests</u> [εἰ ἐξενεδόχησεν],
<u>washed the feet of the saints</u> [ἀγίων πόδας ἔνιψεν],	since she <u>washed the feet of the saints</u> [εἰ ἀγίων πόδας ἔνιψεν],
and shared her bread with <u>the needy</u> [θλιβομένοις].	since she cared for <u>the needy</u> [εἰ θλιβομένοις ἐπήρκεσεν],

50. On this and the following, see Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 162–74.

	unmarked (zero-level) total, modified citation from Luke 23:42:
<u>Remember her, Lord, when you come into your kingdom.</u>	Jesus, <u>remember me when you come into your kingdom.</u>
<u>[μνήσθητι αὐτῆ[ς], Κύ[ριε], ὅταν ἔρχῃ ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου].</u>	<u>[Ἰησοῦ, μνήσθητί μου ὅταν ἔλθῃς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν σου].</u>

2.3.1. The Citation from 1 Timothy 5:10

The first citation in the inscription is introduced by a direct intertextual link, “according to the words of the apostle,” whereby intertextuality is explicitly marked (full level). This citation formula is common in early Christian literature for citations from the Corpus Paulinum. According to Felle, in the inscriptions ascribed to this corpus, the most frequent citations come from the Letter to the Romans and, from the pseudepigraphical Pastoral Letters, especially frequently from 1 Timothy.⁵¹ In this inscription, we find a modified citation from 1 Tim 5:10.

The citation comes from a passage in 1 Timothy that is devoted to widows (1 Tim 5:3–16). In her study on the ecclesiology and ethics in the Pastoral Letters, Ulrike Wagener has demonstrated that the speech about the “widows selected” (χήρα καταλεγέσθω, 1 Tim 5:9) indicates women who exercise a congregational office.⁵² Thus, by virtue of the verb “καταλέγειν, a legally binding act of admission to the office of community widow is described,” and thus the verse belongs “formally and in content in the genre of lists of offices.”⁵³ Since poverty is not one of the following criteria for registration in the ranks of the widows, this group of women is not characterized as receivers of charitable aid.

As stated above, the Pastoral Letters show a tendency to restrict the existing leadership functions exercised by women. This also appears in the remarks on the community widows (1 Tim 5:9–16). In 1 Tim 5:9, the

51. See Felle, *Biblia Epigraphica*, 410.

52. Wagener, *Ordnung*, and, on the widows’ office and the group of widows as a whole, also Angela Standhartinger, “Wie die verehrteste Judith und die besonnenste Hanna: Traditionsgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zur Herkunft der Witwengruppe im entstehenden Christentum,” in *Dem Tod nicht glauben: Sozialgeschichte der Bibel, Festschrift für Luise Schottroff*, ed. Frank Crüsemann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2004), 103–26.

53. Wagener, *Ordnung des “Hauses Gottes,”* 170.

reception into the widow's office is connected with three conditions; first, with age (she should not be younger than sixty years old); second, with marital status (she should be married only once (v. 9); and third, with the demonstration of "good works" (v. 10a). These are defined more precisely as child-rearing, hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, and the care of the needy (v. 10b).

In the inscription, it is exactly these four good works of the community widows that are attributed to the deaconess Maria. This takes place in the form of the literal adoption of four verb forms and two substantive nouns from 1 Tim 5:10b. In contrast to the biblical citation, these are strung together paratactically in the inscription: ἐτεκνοτρόφησεν, ἐξενδοχῆσεν, ἀγίων πόδας ἔνιψεν, θλιβομένοις. Only the fourth work is modified. Similarly to the biblical passage, the needy are named as receivers of care, but instead of a general "aiding" (ἐπήρκεσεν), Maria "shared her bread with the needy," that is, Maria took care of feeding them.

The activities of the widows taken up in 1 Tim 5:9–10 and in the inscription correspond "to a great extent to the pattern of Hellenistic doctrines of professional duties that also lie behind the episcopal and diaconal lists (1 Tim 3:1, 13), and are similarly complemented through individual demands connected with social status."⁵⁴ The verb τεκνοτροφῆν is a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament, but the motif of caring for children appears in the Pastoral Letters in general as a precondition for congregational leadership positions. In the case of ἐπίσκοποι (1 Tim 3:4) and διάκονοι (1 Tim 3:12) and πρεσβύτεροι (Titus 1:6), the focus is on the officeholders' own children; however, πρεσβύτιδας (Titus 2:4) are no longer reminded of taking care of their own children but generally of educating young women. Horsley has pointed out that this verb is related to both men and women in the literary tradition.⁵⁵ This is important to notice, since it is customary in the secondary literature to associate the education of children with women only.

The verb ξενοδοχεῖν is likewise a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament. The virtue of hospitality, however, is also counted among the requirements for the office of the ἐπίσκοπος (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8). It is also emphasized in other New Testament texts (Rom 12:13; Matt 25:35; 3 John 5–8; Heb 13:2). Foot-washing appears in the Pastoral Letters exclusively

54. Jürgen Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus*, EKKNT 15 (Zürich: Benziger, 1988), 284.

55. *NewDocs* 2:194.

in the exhortation to widows (1 Tim 5:10). However, it has a significant place in the New Testament tradition as Jesus's act performed on his disciples in the Gospel of John (John 13:14–17) and as the washing of Jesus's feet by the sinful woman in the house of the Pharisee in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 7:36–50). Foot-washing in antiquity had the function of honoring and receiving guests.⁵⁶ In the West, foot-washing also appears as a complementary rite to baptism from the third century onward. Whether the inscription also alludes to this practice must remain an open question.

The support of the needy (θλιβόμενοι) by the widows is circumscribed in 1 Tim 5:10 using the verb ἐπαρκεῖν, which implies various forms of help for the sick, the distressed, and other needy people (1 Thess 3:4; 2 Cor 1:6; 7:7).⁵⁷ In the inscription for Maria, this passage is modified and concentrates on the care of the poor in the form of their feeding. This modification at the end of the citation is striking and draws the attention of informed readers. Is this an allusion to a special activity carried out by Maria, as the other activities are listed using Hellenistic topoi? Did she, in fact, share her “own bread”? Was she a well-to-do woman, perhaps a widow, a divorced woman, or a woman living outside marriage who, as a deaconess, shared her goods with the needy? Or does this formulation indicate that Maria, as a deaconess, stood at the head of a community that she led independently?

What is striking about this quote from the instructions aimed at community widows is that it is found in an inscription for a female deacon. The intertextual reading of this inscription with the Pastoral Letters easily evokes the association that the office of deaconess and the widow's office overlap. In research, most diverse hypotheses have been formed concerning the relationship between the two offices.⁵⁸ I doubt that a clear answer to this question can ever be found, because the general rule is that the development of the ecclesiastical offices was not as monolithic as has been widely assumed but differed locally. It also proves to be difficult to delimit the tasks of individual offices precisely. This is already shown in the Pastoral Letters, which mainly discuss the requirements and virtues but not the specific activities of the various offices. In this regard, the widow's office stands out, but the works listed as belonging to it also follow the topoi of Hellenistic discourses of professional duties. Thus, they can only be read

56. See on this point and on the following Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 166–67, with further bibliography.

57. Roloff, *Erste Brief an Timotheus*, 295.

58. See Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 12–14.

to a limited extent as a presentation of concrete actions. They serve above all to upgrade the named officers.

For the interpretation of the inscription for Maria, it follows that the impact strategy of this intertextual reference aims at affirmation. The special accent is on the mutual recognition and emphasis of the virtue of these female ecclesiastical officeholders. However, Maria acted as a deacon, and her activity is legitimized through the explicit reference to the words of the apostle. At the same time, the community widows are remembered and they get their share of glorification, as Lampe emphasizes in her intertextual model. The sixth-century deacon from Asia Minor and the New Testament women are mutually identified, recognized, and valued through intertextuality.

2.3.2. The Citation from Luke 23:42

At the end of the inscription, a request by the unnamed dedicators asks Christ to think of Mary when he comes to his kingdom. The quotation remains unmarked (zero level) and can only be recognized by those who know Luke's text and its potential of meaning. However, Lukan citations obviously enjoyed great popularity in the wording of inscriptions, because according to Felle, this gospel was the most frequently cited in comparison to the other three canonical gospels.⁵⁹

Informed readers recognize that the wording of the inscription comes from the passion narrative, according to which Jesus was crucified together with two criminals. While the narratives in Mark and Matthew only summarily say that they vilified Jesus (ὠνειδίζον αὐτόν; Matt 27:44; Mark 15:32b), this sequence is shaped to a conversation in direct speech in Luke (see 23:39–43). In the Lukan context, only one of the criminals ridicules (ἐβλασφήμει) Jesus by saying: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39). The second, on the other hand, confesses his and the other's guilt, likewise in direct speech, and absolves Jesus from guilt (Luke 23:40–41). Then he turns directly to Jesus with the words: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Ἰησοῦ, μνήσθητί μου ὅταν ἔλθῃς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν σου; Luke 23:42). Jesus's affirmative answer to this offender's confession follows immediately with the promise that the criminal will be with Jesus “today” in paradise (Luke 23:43).

59. See Felle, *Biblia Epigraphica*, 410.

This quotation is taken up and modified in the inscription for Maria. The modifications take place with the personal pronouns, salutations, verb forms, and prepositions, but not in the sense of the speech, which is why the quote, according to Lampe, can be classified as “total and modified” in its degree of intertextuality. It reads: “Remember her, Lord, when you come into your kingdom” (μνήσθητι αὐτῆ[ς], Κύ[ριε], ὅταν ἔρχῃ ἐν τῇ βασιλίᾳ σου).

A change of perspective is carried out in the quotation. The dedicators take over the perspective of the criminal and reformulate the quotation as a recommendation on behalf of Maria. The “remember me”⁶⁰ is recast as “remember her”; the direct address “Jesus” is replaced with “Kyrie” and thus transformed and reproduced as a christological confession; the tense of the verb ἔρχομαι is changed from the aorist subjunctive to the present tense, and the preposition εἰς to ἐν. The eschatological horizon of the New Testament text is creatively transferred in the inscription to the dedicators and their current situation in the sixth century.

The dedicators identify themselves with the clairvoyant and finally saved criminal. Nevertheless, they show more humility than he does by asking for salvation not for themselves but for Maria. This intertextuality thus unfolds both an affirmative and a critical impact strategy. The affirmative strategy aims to legitimize the dedicators and to remember the penitent criminal. At the same time, however, the strategy has a critical element. The Christians make use of the criminal’s words but adapt them by not praying for themselves, as does the criminal in the gospel story, but for Maria, and thus degrade his speech. The revision of this intertextuality is to surpass the New Testament speaker through Mary’s selflessness. At the same time, this allusion sheds new light on the criminal in Luke’s narrative, who surely recognizes Jesus as innocent and as the Messiah but is only concerned with his own salvation, not with the salvation of his fellow criminal. In the inscription, the quotation from Luke is skillfully transferred through modification into a new situation with new effects, which also leads to a new perception of the Lukan narrative.

In addition, the “total and modified” citation aims at emphasizing the contrast in the two figures, the nameless and penitent criminal on the cross

60. This formulation in the Gospel of Luke is, in turn, a citation from the LXX that prefaces the standardized prayer of the pious to God that saving care might be bestowed on them (e.g., Judg 16:28; Jer 15:15). See Michael Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium*, HNT 5 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 760.

and the true deacon Maria of the inscription, who has acted “according to the words of the Apostle.” Informed readers may well make the following association. If the promise of entry into paradise is already given to the criminal (Lampe: verification), how much more appropriate it is for this tried and true deacon Maria (according to Lampe: demonstration). The intertextuality of the inscription and the New Testament text, therefore, also open new perspectives on the latter.

To summarize, the first New Testament quotation of the inscription has an affirmative impact strategy and serves to legitimize Maria by referring to the holders of the widows’ office in 1 Tim 5 and thus also calls them to mind. The second New Testament quotation can be interpreted as having both an affirmative and a critical impact strategy. It serves to legitimize Maria and the dedicators of the inscription. The latter are revising the perspective of the New Testament criminal by asking for salvation not for themselves but for another, namely, Maria. How much more willing will Jesus be to accept this woman into his kingdom.

3. Summary

Inscriptions give special information about the diversity of women’s lives in antiquity. The two inscriptions discussed document two deacons in the first Christian millennium in Palestine and Asia Minor. In this essay, I have paid particular attention to the reception of New Testament texts in these two exemplary inscriptions. Interestingly, both cite or allude to the generally most popular texts of the New Testament. Using the tools of the methodological analysis developed by Lampe, the special characteristics as well as the impact strategies and functions of the New Testament references can be illuminated. The intertextual analysis shows how reading several texts together opens up new horizons of meaning, both with regard to the inscriptions and the New Testament texts. As can be observed, reciprocal interpretations can begin through intertextuality. The affirmative strategy of intertextuality is particularly dominant in the inscriptions. The reference to New Testament women in them serves to legitimize the later women and, at the same time, reminds of the women in New Testament narratives, who are, likewise, emphasized and acknowledged. Intertextuality fulfills constructive functions. It enriches associative reading and sets in motion a reciprocal process of emphasis, recognition, and awareness.

New Testament quotes and allusions appear only seldom in the grave inscriptions for female officeholders. In the selected examples, they are all

the more effective. They connect the deceased female officeholders with the great women of the New Testament. With reference to Christianity's founding period, an authorization and succession are indirectly generated. At the same time, quotes and allusions call the New Testament into the present.