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Mothers, Sisters, and Elders: Titles for Women in Second Temple Jewish and Early Christian Communities

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In this paper I will investigate two fragmentary texts from the Qumran scrolls, each of which gives us a tantalizing glimpse of women, first as part of the community presupposed by each text, and second as having a particular role or status within that community. That role or status is indicated by the use of particular titles, which, according to their grammatical forms, are applied only to women. I will then trace the use of these same titles in later Jewish inscriptions and texts, in order to suggest a wider context in which the Qumran titles might be understood. Finally, I will look at the use of these titles in the early Christian community as illustrated by certain passages in the New Testament. I hope to show thereby a certain continuity of usage among Jewish communities in the second temple period, from the late second century B.C.E. to the early second century C.E.

For the purposes of this paper I will assume, but not argue, that the Qumran scrolls are the product of the Essene movement described by Josephus, Philo and Pliny. However, unlike Philo and Pliny, I believe from the evidence of the Qumran scrolls that the Essene movement as a whole included women, as Josephus indicates in his discussion of the “marrying Essenes” (J.W. 2.164).

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The Qumran Texts

The first text comes from the Cave 4 fragments of the Damascus Document, which have revealed that the Damascus Document contained a much more extensive legal code than was evident from the Cairo Genizah manuscripts. While there is much new legislation in the 4QDoc fragments concerning women, the lines discussed below do not legislate for women per se, but rather reveal the presence in the community for which the Damascus Document is legislating of a group of women singled out for special honor, the “Mothers.” The lines in question occur in 4QD 7 I, 13–15.2

Whoever murmers against the Fathers [shall be expelled] from the congregation and shall not return; [but if] against the Mothers, then he shall be punished ten days, because the Mothers do not have “authority” in the midst of the congregation.

From the parallelism of the terms “Fathers” and “Mothers” it is evident that the term “Mothers” does not simply refer to biological mothers (as is common in biblical Hebrew), but is a special group within the congregation. The command to honor fathers and mothers is found, of course, in the Fifth Commandment (Exod 20:12, Deut 5:16), and is constantly emphasized in Wisdom literature, including Wisdom literature from Qumran.3

The root ḫqd means “variegated, multi-colored,” and the noun form usually means “embroidery” or “multicolored fabric.” It occurs elsewhere in the Qumran literature with that meaning (e.g., 4QShirShabb, 1QM, 4QpIsh). That meaning does not appear to fit the context here; hence the variety of translations. George Brooke, in his contribution to the present volume, takes the primary meaning of the noun seriously, so that ḫmqwd would denote a tangible thing, possibly “a piece of embroidered cloth associated with priestly status.”4 Thus the ḫmqwd would be a mark of authority not worn by women. J. F. Elwolde, on the other hand, has

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1 J. Baumgarten, Qumran Cave 4 XIII; The Damascus Document (4Q266–73) (DJD 18; Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).
2 Baumgarten, Qumran Cave 4 XIII, 162–66. Baumgarten dates the manuscript to the first half of the first century C.E. on paleographic grounds.
3 C. Hempel notes that ḫlb is a frequent self-designation in the communal legislation of the Damascus Document, which sets it apart from the Community Rule. This particular piece of legislation does not appear in the penal code in the Community Rule, which is not accidental. Hempel argues that the Damascus Document contains legislation for the parent community of the Qumran community, while the Community Rule applies only to the ascetic community at Qumran. I would identify this parent community with the Essenes, and the Qumran settlement as an ascetic study center or retreat primarily for Essene men. See C. Hempel, “The Penal Code Reconsidered,” Legal Texts and Legal Issues: Proceedings of the Second Meeting of the International Organization for Qumran Studies, Cambridge, 1995 (ed. M. Bernstein, F. Garcia Martinez, and J. Kampen; STDJ 23; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 343, 346.
4 Cities are often referred to as “mothers,” evidently to denote their important status, e.g., Abel-beth-Maacah in 2 Sam 20:19.
focused on the Septuagint rendering of two words from the root ἰγαθ in 
Ezek 17:3 and Ps 139:5, where the Greek words ἴγημα (“leadership”) and 
ὑπόστασις (“essence”) are used respectively. Thus he argues for a secon-
dary meaning of ἰγαθ as “essential being,” “authority,” or “status,” based on 
“the metonymy of expensive clothing/covering and the power represented 
by it.”7 Finally, in a recent article, Victor Hurowitz proposes that the word 
ῥόδην found here has nothing to do with the ἰγαθ meaning “embo-
dery,” but instead comes from the Akkadian word ḫumû, which means 
“legal claim.” This would involve a ḫqof/gimel interdialec
tical interchange.8 Elwolde’s argument appears most convincing to the present author, hence 
the translation given above.

This lack of authority would explain why the punishment for mur-
muring against the Mothers was lighter than that for murmuring against 
the Fathers. Fathers were highly respected members of the community, 
while Mothers had a less exalted station, as exemplified in the difference 
between permanent expulsion and ten-day punishment. But the very 
presence of a penalty for “murmuring” against the Mothers indicates 
some kind of status and authority.9

The second text that contains titles or epithets for groups of women 
is 4Q502, originally published by M. Baillet under the rubric “Rituel de 
mariage.”10 This papyrus document clearly belongs to the same group 
that produced the Community Rule, since it contains a quotation from 
the Doctrine of the Two Spirits (frag. 16; 1QS IV, 4–6). Baillet noted 
that the manuscript contained praise addressed to the deity, and sug-
gested that the themes of at least the first group of fragments fit best the 
context of a marriage ceremony.11 Baillet’s characterization of the text 
as a marriage ritual has not received universal acceptance, although Da-
vila has recently tentatively supported it.12 Baumgarten has suggested it 
was a “Golden Age Ritual,”13 while Satlow has argued that it may rep-
resent a Spring New Year Festival,14 and Cook has stated that 4Q502 
was “intended to accompany the entrance of youths into the Yahad when 
they came of age.”15 None of these identifications have yet completely 
resolved the question, but nevertheless we can say that 4Q502 is a litur-
gical work for a joyous occasion of thanksgiving and praise, in which dif-
ferent groups within the community participate. For the purposes of this 
paper it is important that the participants are male and female, grouped 
together in worship by age and gender; in some cases the titles appear in 
male and female pairs (e.g., ἰγαθοῖοι, ἰγαθόι, ἵλη, ἰγαθῖν, frag. 19, 3). I would argue that the names affixed to these group-
ings (ἰγαθοῖοι, ἰγαθόι, ἱλη, ἰγαθῖν, etc.) are not simply age designations 
but titles for recognized groupings within the community, like the title 
“Fathers” and “Mothers” in 4QD.16 That titles are being used is evident 
from the use of ἱλη, “daughter of truth,” in frag. 2, 3; this epithet 
must be the female equivalent to the term ἱλη, “Sons of Truth,” 
found in, e.g., 1QS IV, 6.17 Thus women are being given official ephe-
phets or titles in this document, not simply being referred to by age.

The first group with a title I would like to investigate is the ἰγαθοῖοι, “female 
elders,” mentioned in frag. 19, 2 ἰγαθοῖοι ἱλη (restored); frag. 
24, 4 ἰγαθοῖοι ἱλη (restored), in which the letters of ἰγαθοῖοι are 
very broken, but the ḫqof seems certain; and possibly frag. 107, 1: ἱλη, 
where the ending, either a masculine or a feminine plural, is missing. 

The meaning of ἰγαθ in biblical Hebrew is twofold; its primary mean-
ing is “old in years.” When the root ἰγαθ is applied to females in biblical

7 J. F. Elwolde, “rwqmh in the Damascus Document and Ps 139:15,” in Diggers at 
the Well. Proceedings of a Third International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead 
Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira (ed. T. Muraoka and J. F. Elwolde; STDJ 36; Leiden: Brill, 
2000), 72.

8 V. Hurowitz, ἰγαθοῖοι in Damascus Document 4QD (4Q270) 7 I 14,” DSD 9 


10 M. Baillet, Qumrân Grotte 4 III (4Q482–4Q520) (DJD 7; Oxford: Clarendon, 
1982), 81–104, pls. XXIX–XXXIV. 4Q502’s paleographic date is the beginning of the 
first century B.C.E.

11 Baillet, Qumrân Grotte 4 III, 81, compared these fragments to the marriage rit-
uals found in the book of Tobit (Tob 8:1–8).

12 J. Davila, Liturgical Works (Eerdmans Commentaries on the Dead Sea Scrolls 6; 


15 E. Cook, “A Liturgy of Thanksgiving,” in The Dead Sea Scrolls. A New Transla-

16 I thus disagree with Baumgarten’s emphasis on the elderly age of the participants 
in the ritual (Baumgarten, “Golden Age,” 129ff). Groups of all ages are present, and it 
is difficult to pinpoint precisely the age difference between, for example, ἰγαθοῖοι and 
ἵλη. They could be men of the same age, but with different statuses and roles to play 
in the ritual. See also L. B. Elder, “The Woman Question and Female Ascesis Among the 

17 Baumgarten, “Golden Age,” 128.
Hebrew it carries this primary meaning, e.g., Gen 18:3 concerning Sarah and Ruth 1:12 concerning Naomi. However, its secondary meaning in the masculine plural is a technical term referring to a leadership group in ancient Israel. This technical usage continues in the Qumran literature, where the elders are a leadership group (see, e.g., 1QS VI, 8; CD IX, 4; 1QM XIII, 1). I would argue that in 4Q502 מָנהָרָה appears in its secondary meaning of a leadership group, given that frag. 24 places the מָנהָרָה in a council (דָּחֵל), in front of which a female worshipper (!) stands. Frag. 19, 1 also contains the word דָּחֵל; Baillet suggests that the text should be restored as דָּחֵל נוֹדָה מִקְמָה, i.e., a heavenly council, but Davila argues, and I agree, that an earthly council fits the overall context better. In that case it is possible to connect the מָנהָרָה in line 2 with the דָּחֵל in line 1. Since the מָנהָרָה and the מָנהָרָה (restored) in line 2 are connected by the conjunction, we can assume that they form one group (as in the other examples given above). Given that frag. 24 mentions a מָנהָרָה דָּחֵל, “council of male elders,” it can be tentatively argued, on the basis of frag. 19, that this council included female elders as well. This strengthens the argument for Baillet’s restoration of the last word on frag. 24, 4 as מָנהָרָה. If the arguments above are accepted, then we may conclude that since the מָנהָרָה form a leadership group in the community performing this liturgy, then this must be true as well for the מָנהָרָה, with whom they are paired. Thus we find a recognized group of women who played some kind of role in the community, at least as organized participants in its worship life.

The second possible title for women that occurs in 4Q502, albeit in a very fragmentary context, is מָנהָרָה, “sisters,” found on frag. 96, 1. The word מָנהָרָה, “brothers,” also occurs in 4Q502, frag. 9, 11, although unfortunately the two terms are not found together. The term מָנהָרָה in biblical Hebrew can refer to a literal brother or sister (e.g., Gen 4:2, 30:8), any kind of relative (e.g., Gen 13:8, 24:60), or a member of the same tribe or nation (e.g., Exod 2:11, Num 25:18). The use of the term “brother” to refer to fellow Israelites or simply people affiliated with the speaker in some way is widespread in the Hebrew Bible. A specialized use of the term מָנהָרָה as “beloved” occurs in Cant 4:9ff., and in Tobit the term is used to indicate a wife who is also a fellow Israelite (Tob 5:21, 7:15, 8:4, 7). In Qumran literature “brother” is used to indicate fellow community members (e.g., CD VI, 20; VII, 1–2; 1QS V, 25; VI, 10). If this is the usage meant for מָנהָרָה here in 4Q502, the same may be true for מָנהָרָה as well; that is, the “sisters” are fellow female members of the community. Unfortunately the contexts are too broken to be certain. The word מָנהָרָה occurs in the first line of frag. 96, followed by words for “blessing” and “joy,” but whether the text is referring to blood sisters, fellow Israelites or even brides or wives is completely unclear. Baumgarten speculates that the “Mothers” and “Fathers” of 4QD may be related in some way to the “Sisters” and “Brothers” of 4Q502, this is entirely possible (see the discussion concerning the early Christian evidence below) but difficult to prove.

In conclusion, we have two texts from the Qumran collection that contain two, and possibly three, terms that were used as titles or epithets for recognized groups of women in the communities reflected by the documents. Although these texts are not directly related to each other, they are indirectly related through their mutual relationship to the Community Rule. Therefore, I would argue that the communities reflected in the two texts are one and the same, and that that community group is the Essenes, who certainly contained women in their “marrying” manifestation (Josephus, J. W. 2.160) and in their ascetic, chiefly male manifestation may have included a small number of women. These texts make clear that these female Essenes, although not in any way equal to the male Essenes, were active, honored and organized participants in their community life.

Jewish Sources Outside Qumran

The two texts we have just discussed, 4QD and 4Q502, are not just important pieces of evidence for reconstructing the place of women in the organizational and communal life of the Essene/Qumran commu-

18 Although the term can also refer to old men; see CD XIV, 14 and 1QpHab VI, 11.
19 Baillet, Qumrân Grotte 4 III, 86–87; Davila, Liturgical Works, 196.
20 Davila, Liturgical Works, 197.
21 Davila notes the use of the term “brothers” to refer to the followers of Bar Kokhba in 5/6Hev 12, 4. This secular document dates to the second century c.e. Davila, Liturgical Works, 193.
The use of the epithets “Mothers,” “Sisters,” and “Female Elders” in these documents may be the earliest attestation for the use of these titles for women in a second temple period Jewish community, making 4QD and 4Q502 extremely valuable for reconstructing the social history of women in second temple Judaism. I will now survey the evidence for the use of these titles in Jewish sources outside the Qumran literature in order to demonstrate that their appearance in the Qumran scrolls is not an anomaly, but part of a more widespread practice in which women attained both honored stations and leadership roles in various Jewish communities of the late second temple and post-70 C.E. periods.

The most compelling evidence comes from Jewish inscriptions from the Hellenistic and Roman diaspora communities. These inscriptions, collected by Brooten and Kraemer, appear both in Greek and Latin and date from the first century B.C.E. to the sixth century C.E. Their provenances reach from Italy to Asia Minor, Palestine and Egypt. These inscriptions give the titles “Mother of the Synagogue” (μήτηρσυναγωγῆς, mater synagogae) and “elder” (πρεσβύτερα) to women. As Brooten has argued, there is no reason to assume that these titles do not reflect a leadership role for the women so designated.

Brooten lists seven Greek inscriptions that contain the epithet πρεσβύτερα, and Kraemer adds one more. The women called πρεσβύτερα appear to have been members of a synagogue council of elders. Recall that the תוֹוח in 4Q502, frag. 19 are paired with the מִסְכִּינָה in relation to a דּוּש, and may appear with them in a דּוּש in frag. 24. Although caution is in order when drawing any connection between these two disparate bodies of evidence, the linguistic parallels are intriguing. Does 4Q502 reflect a mixed-gender council of elders, a practice which became more common in the diaspora?

There are three Greek and two Latin inscriptions in which the title “Mother” appears. There is also one intriguing inscription with the title πατερεσσα, “fatheress,” indicating without doubt that the woman named in the inscription, Alexsandra, was a female pater. It is difficult to determine whether or not the title “Mother of the synagogue” (or indeed “Father of the synagogue”) was only an honorific bestowed upon prominent synagogue members, or denoted an actual function. Brooten argues for a use of the term as an honorific title of respect in the first centuries C.E. based on rabbinic use of the titles “Father” and “Mother” for esteemed persons, although later the title may have indicated a civic function. To her argument we may add the earlier evidence from 4QD, according to which the “Mothers” are held in esteem but lack “authority.”

There is some literary evidence in Greco-Roman Jewish literature for the inclusion of women in the term πρεσβύτεροι, but it is less cut than the inscriptive evidence given above. Philo and Josephus both use the term when discussing the Essenes, but there are two problems. One is that both Philo and Josephus describe the Essene community as exclusively male. If we assume that in fact the Essene community contained women (as is made clear from the Qumran evidence), then it is possible to understand πρεσβύτεροι as including women as well as men. The second is that the ambiguity of the meaning of πρεσβύτεροι makes it difficult to be certain whether they mean “elders” in the technical sense, or (as is more likely) simply “old people.” Philo makes it clear that the πρεσβύτεροι were held in honor by the Essenes:

The aged (οἱ πρεσβύτεροι), even if they have no children, they are as father not only of many children but of very good ones. They usually quit life in extremely happy and splendid old age, honored by privileges and by the regard of so many sons who care for them spontaneously rather than as a result of natural necessity. Hypoth. 13

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24 Brooten, Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue, 1.
25 Ibid., 7–10.
26 Ibid., 57; Kraemer, Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons, Monastics, #89.
28 Ibid., 57.
29 Ibid., 61.
30 Ibid., 62–68.
31 All translations of Philo and Josephus are taken from G. Vermes and M. Goodman, The Essenes According to the Classical Sources (Oxford Centre Textbooks 1; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989).
Note that in these passages Philo observes that the πρεσβύτεροι are treated like fathers. Josephus states (J.W. 2.146) that the Essenes make it their duty to obey τοίς μητράσις; he could mean “old people,” but Hippolytus (Refutation of All Heresies 9.25), who is adapting Josephus, says that the Essenes are taught to obey τοίς ἄρχονσι καὶ πρεσβύτεροις (“rulers and elders”), which may imply the more technical sense of “elders.”

Philo also uses the term πρεσβύτεροι in his description of the Therapeutae, a Jewish mixed-gender community of contemplatives near Alexandria. He says regarding the hierarchy of the Therapeutae community:

Elders (πρεσβύτεροι) are, in their regard, those who from their earliest age have passed their youth and maturity in the contemplative branch of philosophy . . . Contempl. 2.67

Thus the πρεσβύτεροι are not simply old, or may not be old at all; they have reached a certain stage in the contemplative life. This implies that πρεσβύτεροι here carries its more technical meaning, also found in the Qumran literature.

Philo also compares the older Therapeutae to “fathers” (πατράσι) and “mothers” (μητράσι), claiming that the younger members of the group wait upon them like “true sons.” It may be that the older Therapeutae held the honorifics “Father” and “Mother,” but this is speculation.

Outside Philo and Josephus the literary evidence is very sparse. 4 Macc. 16:14 refers to the woman who is martyred along with her seven sons as a πρεσβύτιτι: “O mother, soldier of God in the cause of religion, elder and woman!” There is no reason to think the text is calling attention to the mother’s age. She is being honored with the title “elder.” The fact that the author adds “and woman” (γυναι) indicates that “elder” would normally refer to a man.

Brooten cites a fifth century c.e. Christian document, De Altercatione Ecclesiae et Synagogae, in which the title matres synagogae, referring to a Jewish office holder, occurs. Thus the title is known (at least among Christians) beyond its immediate Jewish context. There are to my knowledge no uses of the term “sister” as a title for a female member of a Jewish community outside of Qumran. The term is used in some second temple literature to denote wives or sweethearts; for example, Joseph uses the term for Aseneth in Jos. Asen. 7:11. If 4Q502 is a marriage liturgy, then this connotation may be appropriate for the mentioned in frag. 96.

Evidence from the Early Christian Communities

Finally, the early Christian communities produce evidence for the use of the epithets πρεσβύτερα, ἀδελφὴ and possibly μήτηρ as titles for women in positions of leadership and authority in the early Christian community.

Ἄδελφος and ἀδελφὴ were common terms for fellow Christians (i.e., as members of the same community, a use inherited from the Jewish community) and as such are ubiquitous in the various books of the New Testament. The plural term ἀδελφῷ, “brethren,” may be understood to include both men and women (as, for example, in the translation of the New Revised Standard Version). This understanding is certain, since ἀδελφὴ is used on its own to signify female members of the early Christian communities (e.g., 1 Cor 7:15; Rom 16:1; Jas 2:15). It is also used in the more technical phrase “sister wife” (ἀδελφή γυναῖκα; 1 Cor 9:5). Paul may use this phrase simply to mean “believing wife,” since he claims that the other apostles, including James the Younger and Cephas, were accompanied by their wives. These wives may have participated in various leadership roles in the communities they visited, but Paul does not say this. In fact, Paul does not use the term “sister wife” to describe the roles of women in the early church, which have established that, contrary to traditional views, women did play active roles in missions and the founding and leadership of early Christian communities. See, e.g., E. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983) and, most recently, U. Eisen, Women Officeholders in Early Christianity (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000).

32 I do not identify the Therapeutae with the Essenes, even though Philo mentions the Essenes in the first line of De Vita Contemplativa. Philo is contrasting the life of action as practiced by the Essenes with the contemplative life of the Therapeutae. The two groups are therefore two sides of the same coin, comparable but not identical. Therefore it is methodologically permissible to use the description of the Therapeutae as a comparison. See also J. Taylor and P. Davies, “The So-Called Therapeutae of De Vita Contemplativa: Identity and Character,” HTR 91 (1998): 3–24.

33 Brooten, Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue, 63–4.

34 There have been many discussions of women’s roles in the early church, which have established that, contrary to traditional views, women did play active roles in missions and the founding and leadership of early Christian communities. See, e.g., E. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983) and, most recently, U. Eisen, Women Officeholders in Early Christianity (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000).

35 A. Clark Wire, The Corinthian Women Prophets (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1990), 102.
female member of the two missionary couples mentioned by name in his letters: Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:4–5; 1 Cor 16:19) and Junta and Andronicus (Rom 16:7). Neither of these women are called “sister wives,” although Prisca is identified as the wife (γυναῖκα) of Aquila in Acts 18:2. Both women are active as missionaries and leaders in the early Christian movement; Paul credits Junta with being “prominent among the apostles,” while Prisca travels with Paul and has a house church (1 Cor 16:19). A certain Nereus and his “sister” (τὴν ἀδελφήν αὐτοῦ) are mentioned in Rom 16:15; it is possible that they are a missionary couple.36

It seems reasonable to assume that the term πατέρας in 4Q502 is parallel to the gendered use of the term “father” in the New Testament, that is as a fellow (female) member of their respective communities. If 4Q502 is a marriage ritual, then it is possible that πατέρας has a similar meaning to “sister wife,” that is, a wife who is also a member of the particular community behind the text (as the term “sister” is also used in Tobit; see above).

The use of the term “sister” as “fellow Christian” also fits in with the creation in early Christianity of “fictive kin groups,” in which the believer’s relationship with the newly formed Christian community supersedes that with his or her actual blood relatives.37 It is in this context that the term “mothers” is used in the New Testament when it does not simply mean “biological mother.” Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (3:31–35 // Matt 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21) rejects his biological family in favor of a new family of fellow-believers: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother (ἀδελφός) and sister (ἀδελφή) and mother (μήτηρ).”38 This notion continues in the early Christian movement: Thelma, in The Acts of Paul and Thecla, rejects both her biological family and her fiance in favor of a new ascetic life after being converted by Paul. She finds a new mother in her protectress Tryphena, whom she converts to Christianity. In I Timothy, in which the structure of the Christian community is being subsumed into the Roman patriarchal family structure, the readers are urged, “Do not speak harshly to an older man (πρεσβυτέρῳ), but speak to him as to a father (πατέρα), to younger men as brothers ( ἀδελφοῖς), to older women (πρεσβυτέραις) as mothers (μητέρας), to younger women as sisters ( ἀδελφάς) — with absolute purity” (5:1–2). In other words, these women are to be considered the same as biological mothers and sisters; thus a fictive kin group is formed. It is possible that in this new kin group “Father” and “Mother” were honorifics used for revered older members of the church. Certainly a parallel can be drawn with Philo’s description of the Therauteae, who “like true sons” await “upon “theirs fathers and mothers” (Contempl. 2.72); in other words, they create a fictive kin group. According to Philo, the aged Essenes are also treated like fathers by the younger members (Hypoth. 11.13). Philo asserts that this occurs even if they have no biological children; that is, the Essenes too formed a fictive kin group. I would argue that this notion of a “new family” in the community is at least part of what is behind the terms πατέρας and μήτηρ in the Damascus Document; as biological parents are to be honored, so are the new parents found in the community.

The term πρεσβύτερος, “elder,” appears in the New Testament and other early Christian sources, but with the ambiguity in meaning we have already discovered between “old person” and “senior leader.” In passages such as 1 Tim 5:1–2, discussed above, the terms πρεσβυτέρῳ and πρεσβυτέραις mean “old men” and “old women.” This is likewise the case in 1 Pet 5:5 (but cf. 5:1) and Titus 2:2–3 (in which older people are role models). However, the word πρεσβυτέρος also indicates one having a leadership role in the early Christian community as it formed hierarchies of leadership. This is clear from such passages as Acts 14:23, where the πρεσβυτέροις are appointed; 1 Tim 5:17, where the πρεσβυτέρους who “labor in preaching and teaching” are to receive double compensation; and Jas 5:14, where the πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας pray over and anoint the sick. These passages originate in three very different groups within the early Christian movement, so the title was widespread. In passages such as these, we must not allow the masculine form of the noun to be misleading; it is probable that these groups of elders also included women.39 Women are called πρεσβυτέρα in several early Christian inscriptions, in which the epithet signifies the holder of an office rather than an old woman. F. Cardman cites two Latin inscriptions: “Leta the

36 Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 180.
38 Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 147.
39 Eisen, Women Officeholders in Early Christianity, 4–6.
presbyter” (Italy, 4th/5th centuries) and “the presbyter Flavia Vitalia (Yugoslavia, 425).” Kraemer (## 93, 94) mentions two inscriptions, one from third century C.E. Asia Minor, the other from Sicily in the 4th/5th century:41 “Diogas the bishop to Ammion (fem.) the elder (πρεσβύτερα) in memory,” and “Here lies Kale, the elder (πρεσβύτερας)”, Eisen adds two more, one for “Epikto the Presbytis (πρεσβυτιδας)” from Thera, 2nd–4th centuries C.E., and a label for the mummy of the “Presb(ytera) (πρεσβυτεριας) Artemidora,” from 2nd/3rd century C.E. Egypt.42 Some early Christian movements later condemned as heretical had women elders among their leaders (e.g., the Quintillians).43 Further, the Synod of Laodicea, which took place in the 4th century C.E., legislated against the participation of women elders in ecclesiastical functions.44 That women held other offices and bore other titles in the early church such as “deacon” (e.g., Phoebe, Rom 16:1) and “widow” (e.g., 1 Tim 5:3–16) is beyond dispute. The title “elder,” however, would seem to be a specific inheritance from the parent Jewish community in Christianity, as is the use of this title (for both men and women) in its technical sense. Thus we see a continuous use of this title for women from its appearance in 4Q502 (probably a product of the Essene community), through Diaspora Jewish communities and into the early Christian movement.45

The appearance of the epithets ταμ, τωνα, and των in the Damascus Document and 4Q502 is important new evidence for the attempt to reconstruct women’s roles and status in various groups within second temple Judaism and early Christianity. They constitute the earliest appearance of these titles in second temple Judaism. 4QD was copied no later than 50 C.E., and the composition of the Damascus Document is even earlier, since its earliest manuscript (4Q266) dates to the first half of the first century B.C.E. Thus some form of the Damascus Document was in existence in the second century B.C.E., and that form may well have included the passage in question. 4Q502’s paleographic date is the beginning of the first century B.C.E., which means, unless it is an autograph, that it was composed even earlier. Thus by the first century B.C.E. these epithets, indicating a particular role and status for women within the Essene/Qumran community, were in use. These titles are not, however, unique to the Essenes, since they also appear in Hellenistic Jewish inscriptions and early Christian works. Thus, although the particular functions attached to these titles may vary from community to community, they are indications that women were leaders and participants in community organization and worship in second temple Judaism, roles that continued in the early Christian movement.

41 Kraemer, Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons, Monastics, 221.
43 Kraemer, Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons, Monastics, #103.
44 Eisen, Women Officeholders in Early Christianity, 121.
45 Another fruitful avenue of investigation, unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, is the use of these titles in the Greco-Roman world generally.