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**Eisen, Ute E.**  
***Amtsträgerinnen im frühen Christentum: Epigraphische and literarische Studien***

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Bernadette J. Brooten  
Brandeis University  
Waltham, MA 02254-9110

This book, a revised version of Eisen's doctoral dissertation under the directorship of Henning Paulsen at the University of Hamburg, is a remarkable achievement. Eisen analyzes over fifty Greek and Latin early Christian inscriptions that apply the titles "apostle," "prophet," "teacher," "elder," "widow," "deacon" or "deaconess," "bishop," and "steward" to women, interpreting them against the background of literary sources. The Roman- and early Byzantine-period sources range in date from antiquity through the Middle Ages. Since she was able to build upon only a few studies of ancient female office holders that focused mainly on deaconesses or widows, Eisen was required to build her case from the ground up.

Eisen persuasively argues that most of the inscriptions and literary sources refer to female leaders, rather than to bearers of honorific titles or to wives of clerics. She postulates that women preached the gospel as apostles; prophesied without church opposition to female prophecy *per se* until the fourth century; taught; carried out the liturgical functions of elders/priests and, in at least some communities, the administrative functions of bishops; and could function as congregational or monastical stewards. Further, Eisen supplements previous research on female deacons/deaconesses and church widows with epigraphical evidence that can form the basis for future social historical research.

Previous assumptions that women did not hold office, because male church leaders disallowed it, or that they exercised leadership only in marginal, heretical communities, such as the New Prophecy movement (generally termed "Montanism"), do not stand the test of Eisen's evidence. Female leadership was, however, controversial, and Eisen has painstakingly pieced together both the evidence for female leadership and the opposition to it. Eisen's juxtaposition of a letter by Pope Gelasius I (492-96) with epigraphical evidence for female elders illustrates her method. Pope Gelasius wrote a letter to the

bishops of Lucania (known now as Basilicata), Bruttium (Calabria), and Sicily complaining about Christian women officiating at the altar and participating in offices assigned to men. Fourth- and fifth-century inscriptions memorializing female Christian elders in Sicily and southern Italy confirm Pope Gelasius's complaints. In Bruttium in the fourth or fifth century a husband (who bears no title) erected a Latin grave inscription to his wife, Leta *presbitera* (p. 131-33). Similarly, in a Greek inscription from Sicily, a woman named Kale bears the title *PREB*, probably *presbyteria* or *presbytis* (pp. 129-31; see p. 126 for evidence that variations of the abbreviation *PREB* usually designate a church official, rather than simply an older person). Jewish inscriptions from precisely that same region at just the same time confirm that Christian women were not alone in behaving in a fashion unacceptable to the pope (David Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], vol. 1, nos. 59, 62, 63, 71, 116). Kale's and Leta's Christian communities may have been in danger of being defined as heretical by the pope, but the geographical and chronological range of Eisen's evidence makes clear that male leaders opposing women's leadership had to contend with it over a period of centuries.

Eisen's least debatable chapters concern deaconesses and church widows, while the most controversial will be that on female bishops. By filling in the picture with epigraphical and literary sources on women teaching, prophesying, missionizing, and administering funds, Eisen's case for female bishops appears more plausible. Further, according to Epiphanius, women clearly served as both bishops and elders in some Christian communities. When she presents the ninth-century inscriptions from the Zeno Chapel of St. Prassede in Rome that describe Theodora, the mother of Pope Paschalis 1, as *episcopa*, Eisen discusses the possibility that *episcopa* is an honorific title, designates Theodora as presiding over virgins and widows or as an abbess, or is a later interpolation. Eisen presents counter-arguments, such as that virgins and widows are not mentioned here, that abbesses otherwise do not have the title *episcopa*, and that the title needs to be explained even if it were to have been an interpolation. At the end of her section on the St. Prassede inscriptions, Eisen judiciously leaves the interpretation open (pp. 195-202; although at a later point, she does use less cautious language, p. 208). Eisen has not attempted to recreate history as it really was, but rather, by presenting hitherto overlooked epigraphical sources and by critically examining prior interpretations of patristic sources, to help us to imagine early Christian communities in new ways. Even though some readers might disagree on one or two points, those who wish to contest the whole enterprise must mount plausible counter-interpretations to all of her sources. Thus, reasonable scholars might disagree on whether some male church leaders did oppose female prophecy *per se*, and not just individual female prophets (chap. 3), but that would not substantively undermine Eisen's argument.

Eisen's correlation of inscriptions with contemporaneous literary sources enables her to look from late antiquity back toward the New Testament and other earlier sources with sharpened questions. Several centuries of epigraphical and literary sources for female

teachers, elders, bishops, and others confirm Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's early warning against assuming that androcentric language always means the absence or the marginality of women in the early church. Thus, it becomes more plausible to see Prisca (1 Cor 16:19), Nympha (Col 4:15), Tavia (Ign Smyr 13:2) and the widow of Eпитropos (Ign Pol 8:2) as administrators of the type named in Phil 1:1 (pp. 202-209).

If the book is translated into English, which it certainly deserves, an index could increase its usefulness. For completeness' sake, we should add Didymus the Blind (*On the Trinity* III, 41:3) to the so-called Dialogue between an Orthodox and a Montanist as one who takes 1 Cor 14:35 and 1 Tim 2:12 (pp. 71-72) as prohibiting women from writing books in their own names.

Eisen does not claim to have included all relevant sources. With around 30,000 extant early Christian inscriptions, that would have been impossible. Future researchers therefore have the opportunity to build on this important work.