

Jewish Epigraphic Culture in the Late Roman Age: Synagogue Inscriptions

Proposals of a Dissertation for Habilitation at the Jewish University of Budapest

1. *The Roman Empire as an “Epigraphic Civilization”*. – The nearly three quarters of a million inscriptions chiselled in stone, bronze, wood and other materials, and which came to light in the territory of the former Roman Empire, form a unique historical source of documents which allow us to cast a glance at almost every field of ancient life. The spectrum of the Roman inscriptions ranges from the primitive epitaphs to the colossal monuments which served as visual representations of the state authorities. This medium of self-representation, since it could easily be adapted to the local native languages, was widespread in all territories of the Imperium Romanum. The “epigraphic civilization” (Louis Robert) accepted in the provinces of the Roman Empire, established special “epigraphic environments” (Greg Woolf) or “epigraphic landscapes” (Susan Alcock), although the “epigraphic habit” (Ramsay MacMullen) or “epigraphic consciousness” (John C. Mann) showed a different picture according to people, age, and area.

2. *The Jewish “epigraphic habit” in the light of the Mosaic Law, the Rabbinic and diaspora literature*. – What was this picture like in Iudaea/Syria–Palaestina under Roman occupation? What was the “Jewish epigraphic habit” like? What did Iudaea/Syria–Palaestina as “epigraphic landscape” look like? In order to answer these questions we examined the survived epigraphic material of the Late Roman–Early Byzantine Jewish synagogues. According to our working hypothesis in the case of Jewish epigraphy we have to find significant differences compared to that of the surrounding (pagan, Christian or Samaritan) sacred places. The main reason for this deviation can be found in the Mosaic Law which expressly forbids the erection of any stela (Lev. 26:1; Deut. 16:22). This strict prohibition was violated by only two people in the Bible: Saul and Absalom (1Sam. 15:12; 2Sam. 18:18), in both cases they and the whole people of Israel had to suffer severe punishment with immediate effect. The deuterocanonic scripture 1Macc. 14:25–29 cites the text of an edict of Simon the Maccabee which was chiselled in bronze and stone tablets and placed in three points in Jerusalem. Although we do not find Rabbinic rules concerning the making and placing of inscriptions in the enormous Talmudic corpus, it could be typical that even the highly Hellenized Philo of Alexandria condemns those “fools”, who erect honorary inscriptions for themselves (*De somniis* 1.242–247). Inscribed pillars (*matseva*) in the Bible are mentioned positively only twice: in both cases God himself ordered his people to carve the text of the Torah (or the Decalogue) to stones (Deut. 27:2–8; Josh. 8:31–32). Notwithstanding there are practically no synagogue inscriptions with Biblical quotations in the late antiquity, and we cannot even find Jewish propitiatory inscriptions in the epigraphic material of the Roman Empire.

3. *Common characteristics of the religious epigraphy in the Roman Near-East*. – If we examine the architectural inscriptions turned up in the Late Roman–Early Byzantine Near East, we can ascertain that in spite of the diversity of languages, ethnic, political and religious identities, there existed a kind of epigraphic koine in this area. The vanishing pagan shrines and the flourishing Christian churches, as well as the Jewish and Samaritan synagogues spoke more or less the same “epigraphic language”, in spite of the fact that they were written in different (Syriac, Samaritan, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, Nabatean etc.) tongues. This phenomenon is well

attested on the more than fifty Greek inscriptions of the Hammat Gader bath-complex which contain the following formula repeatedly: “*Remembered be for good in this holy place...*” This text is almost literally identical with the *exvotos* painted or chiselled to the walls of Jewish synagogues by individual donators. In this case the “holy place” means the synagogue which an orthodox Jew would never mix up with a profane public bath of course. At the same time this text could as well turned up in a pagan shrine of Asclepius. This “epigraphic koine” was strengthened by the common architectural features of the religious buildings which is clearly shown by the lintels found in the Golan and Galilee. It is impossible to determine whether these lintels—often made without inscriptions—belonged to a pagan, Jewish, Christian or Samaritan holy place.

Other characteristic features, however, show that within this “epigraphic koine” there were some “dialects”, on the basis of which we can almost certainly specify the religious affiliation of an inscription. For instance, in the early Byzantine Christian churches beside the text of the Old and New Testament the masterpieces of the pagan Greek literature (e.g. Homer) were abundantly quoted as well. The Samaritans carved their own sacred texts and Decalogue in their holy places. The Jews were rigorously reserved from these things: in their synagogues we can rarely come accross Biblical quotations (see below 4.1), and they never cite pagan texts. This reservation, however, paradoxically do not appear in the figural ornaments of mosaic floors.

4. Special characteristics of the epigraphic culture of the Jewish synagogues.

4.1. *Lack of Biblical quotations.* – As it was recognized by the enemies of the Jewish communities (e. g. by Joannes Chrysostom), the sanctity of the Jewish synagogues was provided by the presence of the “Torah and the Prophets” and so it has been since then that the reading and interpretation of the Torah has played a central role in Jewish worship. The central role of the Torah in the ancient synagogues is proved by the inscription on the building of the Theodotos synagogue in the first century Jerusalem, according to which the edifice was devoted among others to “*the study of the Torah*”. In the Late Roman synagogue in Sardis there was a *tabula ansata* found near the Torah shrine with the following Greek text: “[*You, who*] *find, after you broke up, read and observe*” (on the basis of Gyula Rugási’s Hungarian translation). Although the expressions—particularly the word for “breaking up” (*kladzo*)—of the text cannot be tied exclusively to the Hebrew Bible, and are well attested in the vocabulary of the late antique Gnosis and several mystery religions, the text is undoubtedly referring to the custom of reading and interpret the Bible.

We could rightly expect from such a “text-centered community” (Moshe Halberthal), as the Jewry organized around synagogues, to cover their holy places and their furniture with Biblical quotations. However, we can rarely find Scriptural citations carved on lintels or trimmed on mosaic floors of the Jewish synagogues. Amidst the ruins of the tiny synagogue (or rather study house) of the Galilean Meroth a lintel proclaimed: “*Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out*” (Deut. 28:6). The text—often occuring on the lintels and mosaic floors of the churches—according to the paleographers originally contained the word *baruch*, and the rest of the Scriptural verse was only later added. The Septuagint version of the well-known prophecy of Isaiah: “*But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strenght*” (40:31) appears on the mosaic floor of the synagogue of Caesarea, but the reading of the fragmentary text is highly doubtful. Biblical quotations found on mosaics (Beth Alpha, Meroth, Sepphoris) or wall paintings (Dura Europos) are most frequently labels written to Biblical characters or scenes. The label

inscriptions in the Caesarean synagogue were written in Greek; on the mosaic floors of the synagogues in Eretz Israel they are written in Hebrew; while the labels on the Dura Europos synagogue are quoted from the Aramaic Targums.

It would be proper to ask: what was the reason why the epigraphic display of the Biblical quotations was *pièce de résistance* in the late antique Jewish synagogues? One of the reasons probably was that God's Word, in the form of sacred scrolls and *mezuzoth*, was already present in the synagogues and the study houses. Moreover, according to the Mishnaic and Talmudic law the Torah could only be written to parchment with ink. The other reason might be the fear of profanization, as well as the desire to separate from the churches and the Samaritan synagogues. The later ones were literally "filled up" with verses quoted from their own Scriptures. Interestingly enough this reservation disappeared in the Middle Ages: Benjamin of Tudela (1160–1173) in the synagogue of Baghdad saw Psalms written in gold letters.

4.2. Lack of invocation of the Holy Name and the use of euphemistic names for God. – In the pagan Graeco–Roman world it was a self-evident phenomenon that the holy precincts, sanctuaries, altars and other cultic objects were labelled with the names of their "owner" deities. Jews were considered to be exceptions in this field as well, since they were restricted by the third commandment which explicitly forbade "to take the Lord's Name in vain" (Exod. 20:7). (In the Samaritan synagogues even the most sacred *tetragrammaton* is often inscribed.) Among the cca. 150 Palestinian synagogue inscriptions there were only two dozen which mention God in one form or another. Fourteen–fifteen out of these inscriptions were written in Greek, only seven were composed in Hebrew or Aramaic, and these are mainly private dedications. The mention of the Name is not homogeneous even in the diaspora: it is totally missing from the synagogue of Apamea in Syria, but quite often occurs in the Egyptian synagogues. The Palestinian Jewish communities which spoke Aramaic and read/wrote Hebrew, presumably were more Law-abiding than the Hellenized communities in the diaspora or even the Jews living in the Greek towns of Palestine. Notwithstanding, we can claim that in their synagogues, neither in Palestine, nor in the diaspora, the Jews never exceed the prohibition of the third commandment.

We know only five Palestinian synagogues where God's Name is mentioned in Hebrew or Aramaic. In Horvat Ammudim the expression "*Lord of Heavens*"; in Hammat Gader the "*Master of Universe*"; in Jericho "*the King of the World (or Eternity)*" turned up. These Names were certainly inspired by Psalms or daily prayers. On the Ein-Gedi inscription, which is exceptional in several aspects, we find the reference to "*He, whose eyes are going all around the World*" which may be a direct translation of Zechariah 4:10, naturally without the *tetragrammaton*.

In the Hellenized Jewish communities we can observe two main types of euphemistic Holy Names. The most famous is the "Most High God" (*Theos Hypsistos*) formula which often occurs in the Septuagint, the New Testament and the Jewish diaspora literature (especially in Philo's works). The Egyptian Jewish synagogues (*proseuchai*) were dedicated to the "Most High God" in the 2nd century B.C.E. already. According to recent researches this name was used primarily by non-Jews in order to refer to the God of Abraham, hence under this influence the Jews began to use the same expression when communicating with pagans. Later on many syncretistic or expressly pagan communities borrowed this name, but only in the East.

The other most often used euphemistic Name is the "God is One" (*Heis Theos*) acclamation which occurs in Samaritan, Christian and Jewish context as well. On the basis of Leah Di Segni's researches we tend to accept the Samaritan origin of this

formula. In addition to this there is an interesting euphemism found on many inscriptions of the Sardis synagogue: the “Providence” (*Pronoia*). This expression was in all certainty influenced directly by pagan religious inscriptions or indirectly by the Stoic philosophy.

4.3. Modest dedications to the emperors. – According to Philo of Alexandria during the time until his days the Egyptian kings “never once had any images or statues of themselves erected in our synagogues” (*Legatio ad Gaium* 20.138). Not even Augustus insisted on the erection of “images, portraits or paintings” in honour of him. Nevertheless, Philo mentions that during the anti-Jewish riots in Alexandria in 38 C.E. the mob attacked the synagogues and destroyed the signs of the veneration of the emperors: the gilded shields, wreaths, columns and inscriptions. Archaeological and epigraphic finds underline Philo’s statement concerning the veneration of emperors. We cannot find, however, any inscription in any synagogue of the diaspora, which exceed the limits of the veneration of a human being prescribed by the Sacred Law. It is typical that even in the Egyptian synagogues the introductory formula: “*In honour of King Ptolemy and his sister-wife Berenice, as well as their children*”, does not contain the obligatory formula: “*the brother and sister deities*”. The dedicatory inscription of the synagogue in Ostia begins with “*for the welfare of the emperors*” (*pro salute Augustorum*), just like the synagogue at Intercisa (Pannonia) was dedicated “*for the welfare of the Eternal God and our lords*”. In the dedication of the synagogue at Mursa (today’s Osijek in Croatia) we also find the formula *pro salute imperatorum*.

In Palestine up to the present only one inscription at Qasyun (Galilee) has been found with such a formula. In this controversial epigraphic find written to the honour of Septimius Severus and Iulia Domna in Greek and dated to 196/98 C.E. occurs the expression “*by the oath of the Jews*” (*ex euches Iudaion*). What makes it even more interesting is the fact that the building in which the inscription was found, according to the latest archaeological excavations, could not have been a synagogue, but rather a pagan shrine. Naturally, it is conceivable that the inscription was placed there for secondary use.

4.4. Lack of statues, altars and graves. – Flavius Josephus already reminded his readers to the strict prohibition of three-dimensional representations by the Mosaic Law (Exod. 20:4; *Contra Apionem* 2.74). In the Jewish synagogues, indeed, there have not been hitherto found any statues or statue-bases. The lion-statues turned up in the synagogue of Capernaum were symbolic representations of the “Lion of Judah”, but their exact location is not clarified yet. According to the Talmud, the synagogue of Nehardea (Babylonia), called *Shaf ve-Yateb*, contained a certain statue (perhaps a portrait of an emperor), but in spite of this fact it was very popular among the Amoraim (B. Avoda Zara 43b). In the synagogues there were no altars and graves or even epitaphs.

4.5. Peculiar elements of the building, furniture and its ornaments. – In many synagogues, especially in Galilee and the Golan, the façade with one or three gates was the most decorative part of the building. Dedications were often placed on the portals of the synagogues. Some of them—carved on lintels—were related to the making of the portals (Dabbura, Alma, Tiberias, Kochav ha-Yarden, Rama), but the general dedications concerning the whole community were also placed here. The lintel of the Baaram synagogue reads: “*Peace shall be in this place and in every place*”

of Israel. Yosi, the Levite, son of Levi, made this lintel. Blessed be his work. Shalom.” Columns supporting the roof were essential appurtenances of the synagogues, and they came to light in almost every archaeological excavation. Donators of the synagogue often chiselled their own or others’ name into these columns, because they were conspicuous to the visitors. Such columns were found, among others in Dabbura in the Golan, in Gush Halav, Capernaum, Khirbet Jizhakia, south of Beth Shearim.

None of the furniture of the ancient synagogues expresses the central role of the Scriptures in the post-churban Jewish communities better than the Torah Shrine. Even more remarkable is the fact that six excavated pre-70 C.E. synagogues (Gamla, Masada, Herodion, Capernaum, Chorazin, Jericho) did not contain any furniture similar to the Torah Shrine. According to Eric M. Meyers the emergence of the Torah Shrine in the synagogue may be dated to the middle of the 2nd and 3rd century C.E. both in the diaspora (Dura Europos) and in Israel (Khirbet Shema, Nabratein IIa). As the reading of the Torah gradually became the central element of Jewish religious life, the centre of the synagogue was transferred from the hall to the Torah Shrine which was located on the wall facing or directed toward Jerusalem. According to the “degrees of holiness” (cf. m. Kelim 1:6–9) the most holy place of the synagogue is the Torah Scroll itself, and the Torah niche, viz. a fixed wooden repository for sacred scrolls (*tevach* in Mishnaic Hebrew, and *kibotos* in Greek, both expressions mean ‘ark’). From the first building phase of the synagogue in Ostia there was found an inscription mentioning a certain Mindius Faustus, who “erected the ark for the Holy Law”. The second most holy place was the Aaron’s Niche (*Beth Arona*) which was called *hechal*, i.e. ‘shrine’ in the 19th century European synagogues. There can be seen an explicit tendency in the placing of the inscriptions, viz. the more prominent members of the community try to record their names and donations at a closer place to the *hechal*. On the marble tablets of the Sardis synagogue usually the word *nomophylakion* (literally ‘Law-keeper’) means the Torah Shrine. At the 4–5th century synagogue of the Side (Pamphylea) the Aaron’s niche is called *simma*.

The apsidal Torah Shrine and the *bema* was generally separated from the other parts of the synagogue with a barrier called “chancel screen”. This separation probably originated in the teachings of the Amoraim who separated the “sanctity of the Torah Shrine” and the “sanctity of the synagogue” (J. Megillah 3:1. 73d). Archaeological finds prove the existence of marble chancel screens in the synagogues of Palestine from the 6th century onwards. The Hebrew/Aramaic, Greek and Latin inscriptions give an account of the inscreasing sacrality of the Torah Shrine and the chancel screen in the early Byzantine age.

During the excavations of synagogues some peculiar stone chairs were found (Delos, Chorazin, Dura Europos, Ein Gedi, Hammat Tiberias—but the latter one has disappeared in the meantime). The picture of the stone chair of the Chorazin synagogue is a popular illustration in the guide books of Israel. It contains an Aramaic inscription of four lines in the memory of Judan bar Jishmael. The New Testament uses the Greek word *kathedra* denoting the “Seat of Moses” which Jesus referred to (Mt. 23:2). The Talmud uses the same word (in plural) referring to the lavish seats in the synagogue of Alexandria (J. Sukka 5:1; B. Sukka 51b).

4.6. *Magic vessels and amulets.* – Although the Bible strictly prohibits occult practices including the several forms of magic (Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:10–11), the Jews were famous for their magic activities when living among pagans. The analogous and/or apotropaic magic was so widespread in the antiquity that it made its way even

to the realm of Palestinian synagogues. Archeologists found a fragmentary amulet during the excavation of the tiny synagogue at Baaram. The object (6 x 4.5 cm) made of bronze contains an apotropaic prayer in which the owner asks for the protection of God and His angels. Under the threshold of the synagogue of Meroth an amulet was found (4.8 x 13.8 cm) with an Aramaic/Hebrew text of twenty-six lines. The object is dated on the basis of paleographical considerations to the 7th century C.E. The text was written with professedly magical purpose: Jossi ben Zenobia, the leader of the village, requests the Almighty to submit the whole population of the village to him.

5. *The synagogue as “site of memory”*. – In the following I will examine those epigraphic remains which may concern the function of “site of memory” of the ancient synagogue. The term *lieu the mémoire* came into fashion after Pierre Nora’s monumental enterprise: *Les lieux de mémoire*. The shortest definition of the “site of memory” by Nora is as follows: “where the [cultural] memory crystallizes and secretes itself.” The late antique Jewish synagogue was a “site of memory” *par excellence*. The synagogues comprehended both the *recent* (communicative / social) memory of a living generation—see the donative inscriptions—, and the cultural memory reflecting their distant past—see e.g. the priestly courses. Nora says that the purpose of a site of memory is “to stop time, to block the work of forgetting”, and “a will to remember”. The memorial function of the synagogue coincides with one of the most important religious duties of every Israelite: *Zakhor!* (“Remember!”)

5.1. *Halachic inscriptions*. – The inscription found at Rehov in the Beth-Shean valley is by far the longest mosaic inscription ever found in Israel. (It contains three hundred and sixty-five words in twenty-nine lines.) The text deals with agricultural precepts concerning the Holy Land, viz. the tithes and sabbatical produce in various districts of the country. The inscription can be divided into eight paragraphs, each of which is devoted to a particular region. There is also a list of about ninety villages which were permitted or forbidden to the sabbatical year and the giving of tithes. The geographic references, and the names of the vegetables are given in Aramaic and Greek, however, all the connective expressions, the comments and additions to the lists are in Hebrew. Most of the text is known to us from Talmudic and also from several Tannaitic sources. This is the earliest surviving Talmudic exemplar known, which was made apparently not long after the completion of the Palestinian Talmud, and at a site not far from Tiberias, one of the most important rabbinical centers of this period. The text clearly shows that the agricultural precepts were valid centuries after the churban, and the Jews living in Eretz Israel firmly believed that “*The land of Israel is more holy than any other land*” (m. Kelim 1:6).

Detailed examination of the inscription of the Ein Gedi mosaic pavement also proved that even minute details of the Hebrew text can be connected with literary sources. The first two lines name the thirteen ancestors of the world; lines 3–4 list the twelve zodiac signs; lines 5–7a follow with a list of the twelve months of the year; lines 7b–8a name two sets of Biblical personalities: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob on the one hand, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah on the other. Both series conclude with special endings: “*Peace*” or “*Peace upon Israel*”. We are well informed regarding the significance of these latter Biblical names, thanks to the following rabbinical tradition preserved in *Midrash Tehillim* I. 15.: “And this is what people say: upon whom does the world rests? Upon three pillars. Some say (that they are) Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; others say Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and still others say the three sons of Korah.” Line 9 constitutes an eulogium to the leaders of the community.

Lines 10–16 commence with a list of four cardinal offenses for which members of the town would be held responsible: (1) sowing seeds of controversy; (2) slander; (3) stealing; and (4) revealing the “secrets of the town to the gentiles” (lines 12–13). The first three offenses refer to both Biblical and rabbinic commandments, but the meaning of the last one is highly dubious. Efraim Urbach connected it with the secret oath of the Essenes; Benjamin Mazar interpreted it as a reference to a political controversy in the Persian–Byzantine era; Moshe Dothan suggested that the events behind it were religious in nature and were related to the restrictions imposed by Justinian on the reading of the Scriptures. Saul Lieberman has offered an entirely different approach, relating the inscription to the secrets of the balsam industry centered in Ein Gedi. Among the “rather far-fetched hypotheses” (Catherine Hezser), the most plausible for me is that of Ben-Zion Binyamin’s explanation which places our text into the context of synagogue liturgy, and reveals the direct influence of the *Birkat ha-Minim*. This prayer was directed against the “apostates” (*masumdim*), “informers” (*malshinim*), the “heretics” (*minim*), and the “collaborators” (*mosrim*), and on the allies of the “evil kingdom” (*malkut ha-rishah, malkhut zadon*), i.e. the Roman / Byzantine Empire. Naturally, the elusiveness of the text lets the “secret of the town” remain secret to us.

5.2. *Priestly courses*. – Just as the above mentioned *halachic* inscriptions, the priestly courses can be also connected with the synagogal *piyyut*-literature. Inscriptions listing the twenty-four priestly courses are known from Caesarea, Rehov, Kissufim, from an unknown place in Galilee, and even from the far-away Bait al-Hadir in Yemen. These lists contain not only the names of the heads of the priestly families according to the order of service in the Jerusalem Temple (cf. 1Chron. 24:7–18), but also the names of places where each family settled in Galilee after the destruction of the Temple. All lists presumably concluded: “*All the priestly courses are twenty-four.*” At first Samuel Klein reconstructed the twenty-four priestly courses on the basis of literary evidences. Klein’s primary sources were the various *piyyutim* written to the Ninth of Av.

If the reconstruction of the text is correct, the course found in the 3rd century C.E. synagogue of Ahmadiyye, was a Levitical one. The text is as follows: “*Course of Mus, course [of NN]*” (*mishmereth Mush mishmereth*), where Mush is the second son of Merar, who is the son of Levi, the founding father of the Mushi family (cf. Ex. 6:19; Num. 3:20; 1Chron. 6:4; 23:21 etc.). Unfortunately, the list of the twenty-four Levitical courses is not preserved in the Hebrew Bible, consequently it is impossible to complete the whole text.

It is not quite clear yet, why these priestly and perhaps Levitical courses were displayed to the public in the synagogues. The picture drawn from the Talmudic literature shows that the relationship between the sages and the priests cannot be called harmonious in the 3rd–4th century C.E. The vast corpus of rabbinic literature remains almost totally silent about the whole issue of the priesthood and Levirate, and if does it does speak about them, they are usually are mentioned derogatively. In my opinion, the public display of the priestly courses served to preserve the collective memory in the synagogues. In the book of Nechemia we find that after the building of the Second Temple the priests “*sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but it was not found; therefore they were excluded from the piesthood as defiled*” (7:64). The late antique synagogue was filled with symbols referring to the hope of the re-building of the Third Temple. It is reasonable to assume that the priestly courses were considered as practical guides for the restoration of the priesthood in the

renewed Temple. It is highly probable, because similar genealogical lists were kept in the Temple as well. According to the *Sifre* “*there was a place behind the Holy of Holies, where the genealogical lists of the priests were examined*” (I.116. ed. Horowitz).

5.3. Zodiacs and calendars. – We are informed by Flavius Josephus that in the Jerusalem Temple there were no representations of zodiac signs (*Bellum* 5.214), and many sages also declared: “*Israel is immune from planetary influence*” (B. Sabbat 156a-b). It was even more astonishing when synagogue mosaics with zodiac representations were found: in 1920 at Naaran, then eight years later at Beth Alpha. Later three more late Roman synagogues were excavated, whose mosaic floors were decorated with zodiac signs, Helios in his chariot, and the allegorical figures of the four seasons (Hammat Tiberias, Husifa, Sepphoris). Listing of the zodiac signs can be read on the inscription of the Ein Gedi synagogue (see above 5.1.). All astrological representations were labeled with legends written in Hebrew.

This phenomenon is still encircled with tacite amazement in the technical literature. One thing is certain, viz. the pictorial representations cannot be considered isolated phenomena. This theme is very popular in the contemporary *piyyutim*, and its traces emerge in the midrash-literature as well, e.g. the following verse of the *Sir hasirim*: “*its chariot (merkav) of purple*” (3:10) is commented by Pirque R. Eliezer: “Three letters of the Name are written in the heart of the Sun, and eight angels are drawing it. The Sun is sitting on a chariot crowned, and ascends into the sky as a bridegroom, and rejoices like a hero, as it is written” (cf. Psal. 19:6). The presence of the zodiac signs around the chariot of the Sun, and the allegorical figures of the four seasons, is a question well debated among researchers. Goodenough considered them as the manifestations of the Hellenistic mysticism; Urbach regarded them as simple decorative elements; Foerster and Narkiss accepted the cosmological explanation; while Avi-Yonah argued that they were made for practical reasons, i.e. zodiacs were used as calendars. According to Zeev Weiss and Ehud Netzer (excavators of the Sepphoris synagogue) the zodiacs were visual representations of the hope of the restoration of the Temple.

5.4. Dedicatory inscriptions written on behalf of the community. – The late antique Palestinian Jewish communities used special terms for self-definition: *qahal* (*qadisha*), *bene chavurta qadisha*, *bene qarta*, *iraya*, *am*, and *laos*. Like the also mentioned *Israel*, the *qahal* and his companion can be connected with the Biblical definition of the Jewish people: “*For you are a holy people (am qadosh) to the Lord your God, the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself*” (Deut. 7:6). The other names, like the “*all assembly of Israel (qol qahal Israel)*” (Lev. 16:17; Num. 14:5; Deut. 31:30 etc.) also have religious connotations which for the members of the community did make sense *inside* the world of the Bible.

The Aramaic dedicatory inscriptions written on behalf of the community generally have a stable formular language. The majority of the inscriptions mention the construction and/or reconstruction works done in the synagogues by the Jewish community. More often the latter one, because the Byzantine emperors prohibited the building of new synagogues, they allowed only the reconstruction of the old ones.

The dedicatory inscriptions often mention the construction of new mosaic floors, which was rendered possible by the generous donations of the community members. In Jericho the text of the inscription is as follows: “*Remembered be for good, and the memory of the whole community—great or little—will be blessed, who were helped*

by the King of the Universe, who supported and made this mosaic". In Maon the text begins with "Remembered be for good are all the community who made" etc.

The dedicatory inscriptions written on behalf of the community served for double purposes. On the one hand, they expanded the blessing to each member of the community, who shared the burden of the restoration or construction work. On the other hand, these public memorials encouraged the potential donors to give further offerings to the synagogue. A good example for the first aim is the synagogue of Hutsifa which says: "... (and be blessed) each member of the village—great or little—who fulfilled his/her oath." The inscriptions in the Hammat Tiberias and Naaran synagogue combined both aims, in the latter place the prominently placed inscription reads: "Remembered be for good (is) everyone who contributes and gives or will give in this holy place whether gold or silver or anything whatsoever. Amen. Their portion is in this holy place. Amen."

According to Joseph Yahalom each synagogue had no more than one inscription of this type in Palestine; but in the diaspora no such communal benefactorial inscription has been found at all. The reason for this phenomenon might be the dissenting notion of the identity in the diaspora communities.

5.5. *Dedicatory inscriptions of individual donors.* – The vast majority of the epigraphic remains of synagogues are votive inscriptions. The aim of these Jewish inscriptions is basically the same as those of the pagan ones, viz. the fulfilment of an oath, thanksgiving, prayer, keeping somebody's memory. Both the Palestinian and the diasporan synagogue inscriptions are laconic and formulaic ones, they avoid lengthy eulogies and superfluous speech. The most important distinctive mark of the Palestinian Aramaic dedications is the "Remembered (be) for good" (*dakir letov*) formula, the longer version of which is "Remembered (be) for good and blessed" (*dakir letov vilveracha*). This latter one has an exact Greek equivalent in the Hammat Tiberias synagogue: "*mnesthei eis agathon kai eulogian*". The *mnesthei* Greek dedication formula is not known so far outside Palestine and Syria. The text probably can be traced back to the last verse of the Book of Nechemia: "Remember me, oh my God, for good!" (13:30)

Dedications of individual donors most frequently served for the redemption of a vow or fulfilment of an oath (*ex voto*). The vows and oaths could be connected with sacrifices, offerings and/or prayers. It is worth mentioning here that the Hebrew noun *nedar* (vow) is expressed in the Septuagint with the word *euche*, which means 'vow' and 'prayer' at the same time. The most popular phrase on the dedications of the late antique diaspora synagogues was the *euche* and her various forms.

Notwithstanding, the expression *arete* does not occur in the Jewish dedications written in Greek, and we do not find, indeed, the genre of the so-called confessional / propitiatory inscriptions. In pagan context the first meaning of the *arete* is 'miracle', and the 'aretalogy' is nothing but the description of the miraculous deeds of the gods. Pagan deities expected the believers to immortalize their miracles in writing as well, that is why the *stelographein* ('writing on a pillar') became a technical term on the confessional inscriptions with the meaning: 'to record miraculous deeds of gods'. But the God of the Jews did not command his believers such a thing, even warned them not to do so.

Some words are missing, some words have different meaning in Jewish context. For instance the meaning of the Greek *eulogia*—which is in most cases stands with a dative: *eulogia pasi* (Apamea), *eulogia auto* (Tiberias), *eulogia to lao* (Huldah)—is 'blessing' in the Jewish synagogue inscriptions. This benediction was asked for

themselves, for their family, community, people, country, or simply “everybody”, from the God of Abraham, of course.

This leads us to the next theme. What did the ancients ask from their gods? In one word: everything. Health and wealth stood in the first place of their requests. The pagan temples were literally filled up with votive inscriptions made *hyper ton idion*, *pro se et suis*, *pro salute sua et suorum*, *pro salute imperatorum* etc. The ancients prayed for the sowing and reaping, for their own horse or donkey, or occasionally for the rival’s horse to break its legs. They impertinently demanded fortune, wealth and honour; but they prayed also for pregnancy and that the born children would remain healthy.

On the basis of our extant epigraphic sources we can claim that this *Gebetsegoismus* was just as typical of the Jewish as of the pagan believers. The Jews asked blessing in the first place for themselves, in the second place for their wives, husbands, and children. The *hyper ton idion* (‘for the benefit of his/her own’) formula occurs almost with the same frequency on the Jewish votive inscriptions, as the *ek ton idion* (‘at his/her own expense’) on the pagan ones. The main aim of the Jewish euergetism was, indeed, the community itself, this is the reason why the “blessing to the people” (Huldah), or “blessing to ... this house” (sc. the synagogue, Sardis); or “peace to the synagogue” (Gerasa) formulas are so frequent in the Jewish epigraphy. The oaths, vows and prayers found in the synagogues—with the only exception of the modest dedications to the emperors (see below 4.3.)—were written for the members of the Jewish community.

5.6. *Inscriptions written by craftsmen.* – Yose bar Levi, who made the lintels for the synagogues of Kefar Baraam and Alma, proclaimed the blessing for his people in Hebrew: “*Let there be peace in this very place and in every place of His people, Israel.*” At the synagogue of Kefar Baraam the blessing continues with the following text: “*This lintel was made by Yose the Levite, son of Levi.*” At Alma, after the usual ending formulas “*Amen, Selah*”, there is a similar text written in Aramaic: “*I, Yose ben Levi, the Levite, am the craftsman, who made this lintel.*” This code-switching reflects Yose’s personal attitude towards the Hebrew and Aramaic languages: the more official and formular one was the Hebrew; while the using of first person singular in the second inscription indicates that the use of the Aramaic was more familiar for him.

Some craftsmen who placed Hebrew or Aramaic dedications, signed their name in Greek. In Beth Alpha, for example, two building contractors, Marianos and Chanina—the latter name is obviously Jewish—, attached a Greek “appendix” to the Aramaic dedication. (The name of the two building contractors also appear on the Greek inscriptions of the Beth Shean synagogue.) In the synagogue of Dabbura at the Golan, a builder called Rustikos placed an Aramaic dedication, but his name was signed in Greek. In Hammat Tiberias there was a decorative marble plaque was found with the following Greek text: “*Be the grace of God with Abraham, the marble worker.*” Some Aramaic inscriptions—e.g. at the synagogue of Maon—are so poorly written and drafted, that we may rightly assume that the craftsman or the engraver could not speak/write Hebrew/Aramaic. There are also significant errors found on the Aramaic individual inscriptions of the Beth Shean synagogue. The inscription written on behalf of the community (“*Remembered be for good all members of this holy community*”) is correct, because it was in all probability drafted by the leader(s) of the synagogue. But when the craftsman speaks for himself (“*Remembered be for good the craftsman who made this*”), the inscription is suddenly filled with grammatical errors.

6. *The eschatological symbolism of the late antique synagogue.* – There is widely accepted consensus among the researchers of the art of the synagogue that this art can be considered as a strongly symbolic one. These symbols announced information which could be easily “decoded” by the members of the community. This assumption is in accordance with the definition of symbols made by Gershom Scholem: “A symbol, may it be whatever deep, cannot become a riddle. That symbol which is considered by anyone (and especially by a member of the community) an enigma to be solved and interpreted, does not deserve the name »symbol«.”

According to my view many types of the figurative representations and synagogue inscriptions may be related to the Jewish eschatological hope: the waiting for the Messiah, or the *renovatio templi*. At least four well-known elements of the synagogal iconography: the *menorah*, the *shofar*, the four species (*arba minim*), and the incense showel (*machta*) can be considered as “stable iconographic codes” which were widely used not only on mosaics, wall paintings, but even in everyday material culture.

One of the most popular motives of the Jewish art has been the *menorah*, or seven-branch candelabre. The Bible mentions only one menorah in the Tabernacle (Exod. 25:31–40; 37:17–24), and in the Temple of Siloh (1Sam. 3:3), while in the Solomonic Temple there were ten in number (1Kings 7:49; 1Chron. 28:11–19). The first pictorial representation of the menorah can be found on the bronze coin of the last Hasmonean ruler, Matthatias Antigonus (37 B.C.E.). It is remarkable, however, that the menorah became a popular symbol among the Palestinian and diaspora Jewry relatively late, only in the 3rd century C.E. From this time onward the menorah can be found all over the world, where Jewish communities settled. The menorahs were depicted on mosaics, wall paintings, pillars and capitals, ashlar, marble tables, basins, houseware, golden glass, oil-lamps, sarcophagi, epitaphs etc., but in some of the synagogues (Tiberias, Ein Gedi, Maon, Susiya, Esthemoa; Sardis) its free-standing three-dimensional figure was also found. Consequently, the menorah became the *par excellence* symbol of Jewishness at the same time as the cross became the most important identification symbol for the Christians. As Lee I. Levine wrote, the menorah was “the Jewish answer to the cross”. But there is no consensus among the scholars, what is exactly symbolized by the seven-branch candelabre. Determining the possible meaning of the menorah in synagogal context, in my opinion, we must take into consideration the original function of this sacred object. Taking it as a starting point we can agree with the following interpretations: [the menorah represents] “Messianism, resurrection, remembrance of the destroyed Temple, answer to the Christian symbols” (Dan Barag); and “symbol of the Jewish people and Jewish faith which distinguish the Jews from the Christians, it reminds the glory of the Temple and the hope of rebuilding” (Rachel Hachlili).

The ram’s horn, or *shofar* is the second most popular Jewish iconographic motive in Palestine. (In the diaspora after the *menorah*, *lulav* and *ethrog* it is only the fourth most popular symbol on the iconographic “top list”.) In the post-*churban* liturgy the *shofar* was primarily connected with the the *Rosh Hashana*, whose prayer-cycle is called *Shofaroth*. These prayers reminded the people of Israel both of the giving of Law, “when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and become louder and louder” (Exod. 19:19), and the eschatological hope of the Judgement Day as well, when “the Lord God will blow the trumpet” (Zech. 9:14).

The four species (*arba minim*) are connected with the Feast of Tabernacles (*Succoth*). This feast also has a strong eschatological meaning. The *Succoth* is the feast of the harvest, to which the promise of the gathering of the people of Israel is

also attached (cf. Jes. 27:12–13; 11:11–12; Jer. 23:7–8). This promise was once fulfilled in the time of Nehemiah, when the children of Israel “*dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month*” (8:14); but it is an eschatological hope at the same time, which relates to the Kingdom of Messiah, when “*everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of Tabernacles*” (Zech. 14:16). The *Succoth* represented by the “four species” is also connected with the Jerusalem Temple: Solomon on this very day consecrated the Temple to the Name of the Lord (2Chron. 5:3), when the *sechina* fell down from Heaven, set the altar on fire and filled the Hechal and the Holy of Holies (1Kings 8; 2Chron. 7:1–10).

The role of incense shovel (*machta*)—as we have mentioned above—is not yet clear enough. (The *machta* is translated by the Septuagint and Philo *pyreion*, *thyiske*, and *thymiaterion*.) One thing is certain, *viz.* this is also a “stable iconographic code” in the Jewish (and Samaritan) synagogues. The *machta* is connected with the *ketoreth* and *levonah* in the Bible and the rabbinic literature (cf. Lev. 16:13; Ezech. 8:11). The former one is a mixture of incenses, one component of which is the *levonah*. It is very important to emphasize that the *ketoreth* can be used exclusively by the Aronite priests on fixed occasions—during the everyday sacrifices and certain feasts—on the altars of the Jerusalem Temple. The Mishna mentions the *machta* and *ketoreth* several times, but only in connection with the sacrifice of the Temple. For the time being there is no proof that incense burners were used in the synagogues too. According to Leonard Victor Rutgers the—till now unpublished—incense showels found during the excavation of houses of Sepphoris originally belonged to priestly families, but were not used for sacrificial aims.

To sum up, it is provable that all “stable iconographic codes” are in connection with the destroyed Temple of Jerusalem, the Biblical prophecies, and eschatological expectations.

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