

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM EARLY JEWISH EPIGRAPHY?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article presents a concise overview of the most relevant information that can be gleaned from the approx. 4000 Jewish inscriptions from antiquity (c. 300 BCE – 700 CE). Special attention is paid to those areas and topics about which inscriptions are our only (or main) source of information because the ancient Jewish literary sources are silent about them. The stones turn out to be especially relevant to the study of the western diaspora in the Roman and early Byzantine periods.

### Introduction

Over the past 25 years, the study of Jewish inscriptions from antiquity has become a booming business. When I wrote my book *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* in 1990,<sup>2</sup> I had at my disposal some 2000 inscriptions; in 2014, when writing my book *Saxa judaica loquuntur*, I had almost 4000 inscriptions available (all of them from the millennium between 300 BCE and 700 CE). In an unparalleled development, the material has almost doubled in the course of one generation, due *inter alia* to new excavations and the search through museum catalogues. The single most important contribution of early Jewish epigraphy is that the inscriptions yield data that one cannot retrieve from the literary sources. We have thousands of pages of Judaeo-Greek literature, of Dead Sea Scrolls literature, of rabbinic literature, but all these abundant sources do not, or hardly, inform us about quite a number of aspects of Jewish life that the inscriptions do inform us about. *Saxa judaica loquuntur!* Jewish stones speak out! Let us very briefly review some of the areas about which they speak to us.

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is based upon my book *Saxa judaica loquuntur: Lessons from Early Jewish Inscriptions* (Leiden – Boston: E.J. Brill, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs. An Introductory Survey of a Millennium of Jewish Funerary Epigraphy (300 BCE – 700 CE)*, Kampen: Kok-Pharos, 1991.

## Diaspora

First, the extent of the diaspora: Several literary sources do mention the fact that in the centuries around the turn of the era a great number of Jews lived outside the Land of Israel.<sup>3</sup> The lists of countries where Jews lived, and remarks to the effect that Jews lived in many regions and that their customs had become prevalent almost everywhere (cf. Seneca's famous dictum: *victi victoribus leges dederunt*)<sup>4</sup> leave no doubt about the considerable size of the Jewish diaspora. Yet this information is far from being complete. To begin with, these literary passages reflect the situation in the first centuries BCE and CE, not that of later centuries. And, moreover, it is the epigraphic material that shows us that the diaspora was much more extensive than the literary data suggest and that this situation prevailed even more in later centuries. Anyone who takes a look at the map called "Die jüdische Diaspora bis zum 7. Jahrhundert n. Chr." of the *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients* (B VI 18, Wiesbaden 1992) will see that it is epigraphical material that makes us aware of Jewish presence in areas that are never mentioned in the ancient literary sources (such as Spain, Morocco, Germany, and the Crimea).<sup>5</sup>

Most of our epigraphic material is in Greek, even in Jewish Palestine. For instance, more than 95% of the inscriptions from Asia Minor are in Greek, more than 90% in Egypt, and so are some 80% of those in Rome. In this respect, it is telling that of the 609 papyri from the Roman Near East in general found outside Egypt – the vast majority of which are from Roman and Byzantine Palestine – some 325 are also in Greek: that is almost 55%!<sup>6</sup> The question of whether these percentages reflect the degree to which Greek was spoken as the daily language of the Jews is a very complicated one that cannot be dealt with here, but at any rate it can be taken as a fact that Greek was spoken widely by Jews in the diaspora.<sup>7</sup>

## Mobility

Many inscriptions also testify to the mobility of Jews within the ancient world. In epitaphs we find, for instance, a Jew from Jerusalem buried in Athens (*IJO* I Ach26), one from Tiberias in Taenarum (Laconia, *IJO* I Ach55), one from Caesarea buried somewhere in Greece (*IJO* I Ach34), one from Arad in Athens (*IJO* I Ach32), one from Alexandria in Phthiotic Thebes (*IJO* I Ach16); in Rome we find graves of Jews from Thabraca (Numidia; *JIWE* II 508), from Catania (*JIWE* II 238), from Tripolis (which one is unknown; *JIWE* II 113), from Tiberias (*JIWE* II 561); many Jews from Egypt were buried in Jaffa;

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 214; Josephus, *Bellum* 2.398, 7.43; *Oracula Sibyllina* 3.271; Strabo, *ap. Josephus, Antiquitates* 14.115; Seneca *ap. Augustine, De Civitate Dei* 6.11; Acts of the Apostles 2.9-11.

<sup>4</sup> See the reference in the previous note.

<sup>5</sup> A somewhat outdated but still useful survey of the Jewish diaspora by F. Millar can be found in Schürer 1986: 1-86. See the epigraphical update in Bloedhorn 1999: 64-72, and in Williams 2004/2005: 26-33. For a major study of the diaspora, see Barclay 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Based on Cotton, Cockle and Millar 1995: 214-235.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. van der Horst 2001: 174-194 = van der Horst 2002: 9-26.

and thus one could go on. Of course we also know many such instances from the Acts of the Apostles: for instance, the Alexandrian Jew Apollos who went to live in Ephesus (Acts 18:24; cf. 13:1). I am disregarding here the many diaspora Jews whose epitaphs were found in Galilean Beth She'arim, because in those cases we are probably concerned with pious Jews who wanted to be buried in the same place as the great Rabbi Jehuda ha-Nasi (the compiler of the Mishna), and not so much with Jews who moved around the Graeco-Roman world.

## Onomastics

Another area of research that has benefited enormously from Jewish epigraphy is that of onomastics. A glance in Tal Ilan's *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Antiquity*<sup>8</sup> makes it abundantly clear how great the contribution of Jewish epigraphy is for our knowledge of Greek and other names borne by Jews. For instance, it is from inscriptions, more than from any other sources, that we learn the extent to which Jews bore festal and theophoric names. Festal names<sup>9</sup> are names related to Jewish festal days or periods, such as Shabbat or Pesach, e.g., Sabbataios or Sambation, Paschasios, Heortasios (Chaggai), Noumenios (Rosh Chodesh) etc. It is inscriptions that show us how widely used such names were, probably in order to bolster one's Jewish identity. The opposite, however, seems to be the case with the many personal names that contain pagan theophoric elements,<sup>10</sup> such as Isidorus (gift of Isis), Artemidorus (gift of Artemis), Zenodorus (gift of Zeus), further Heracleides, Serapion, Dionysia, even Venus. Should we assume that the origin of these names was completely unknown to the Jews who gave their children such utterly pagan-sounding names? Or did they simply not care that their children bore a name with a pagan theophoric element? These are important questions, yet ones that are very difficult to answer, if answerable at all.

## “Pagan” elements

Related to the last-mentioned problem is the occurrence of Greek mythological motifs and names in Jewish tomb inscriptions. There are epitaphs from Leontopolis in Egypt referring to Hades, the god of the netherworld (*JIGRE* 34, 38, 39), to Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in Hades (*JIGRE* 34, 38, 39), to Charon, the ferryman in Hades (*JIGRE* 141), and one from Beth She'arim in Galilea that even mentions “mighty Moira,” the Greek goddess of Fate (*BS* 2.127)! Even though it should be kept in mind that mythological names such as Hades, Lethe, and Moira could be used in a figurative or metaphorical sense, it is still remarkable that these names with their pagan associations are not avoided. Moreover, there are many other instances of Jewish compromises with

<sup>8</sup> Ilan 2002-2012.

<sup>9</sup> Williams 2005: 21-40 = Williams 2013: 363-387.

<sup>10</sup> See Mussies 1994: 242-276, esp. 247f.

Graeco-Roman culture as attested in inscriptions, such as the adoption of pagan funerary customs (annual banquets in memory of the deceased and decking of their tombs with flowers [*IJO* II 171]), Jewish attendance at the theatre and hippodrome (*IJO* II 15-16, 37; III Syr 10), undergoing a gymnasium education (*IJO* I Ach53; II 22), pagan rituals such as incubation in a non-Jewish temple (*IJO* I Ach45), and visiting pagan shrines (*JIGRE* 121-122), etc.<sup>11</sup>

## Age at death

Another area in which the inscriptions yield data that the literary sources do not inform us about is the average age at death. Mentioning the age at death is one of the many originally non-Jewish epigraphic customs adopted by Jews from the Greeks and Romans. Some twenty-five years ago, I calculated on the basis of the data available at the time that the average age at death for Jews in the Roman period was 28 years (29 for men and 27 for women).<sup>12</sup> Even though the evidence has now increased considerably, these numbers hardly need correcting – they still remain well below 30 years. A great problem, however, is that of the representativeness of this data. With less than a thousand epitaphs mentioning an age at death over a period of some one thousand years, i.e. with data for less than one Jew every year, what do we really know? And apart from this problem, there are a number of distorting factors.<sup>13</sup>

Firstly, there is the problem of the great unevenness of the geographical distribution: some areas yield far more data on age at death than others; moreover, in cities it was far more usual to erect tombstones with inscriptions than in the countryside. Secondly, the chronological distribution is uneven as well: the third to fifth centuries of the Common Era yield much more evidence than the preceding ones. Thirdly, there is the underrepresentation of children: some ancient cemeteries have great numbers of tombs of infants, but these have no epitaphs or only inscriptions without indication of their age at death, meaning that the rate of the actual infant mortality does not become visible at all. A recent estimate that less than half of those born in the Roman Empire reached the age of five seems very reasonable,<sup>14</sup> and that would imply that the average life expectancy was even lower than is often assumed. In a calculation of the average age at death in Roman Egypt on the basis of many hundreds of papyri, scholars came to the conclusion that for men and women together it was between 22 and 25 years (men about 25, and women 22).<sup>15</sup> Possibly, then, the low numbers in our own calculation are still too high!

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Williams 1999: 75-93, esp. 82-83.

<sup>12</sup> See van der Horst 1991: 73-84.

<sup>13</sup> On this problem see more extensively van der Horst 2001: 174-194 = van der Horst 2002: 9-26.

<sup>14</sup> See Burn 1953: 1-31; also his review of Nordberg 1965: 253-257.

<sup>15</sup> Bagnall and Frier 1994: 75-110. They claim that their results are applicable to the Roman Empire as a whole, not without reason; on p. 109 they state that their calculation is “closely comparable to that of present-day primitive societies.” Cf. also Frier 1983: 328-344, for similar results.

Fourthly, there is a serious underrepresentation of women. Even though this is much more the case in pagan than in Jewish funerary epigraphy,<sup>16</sup> the percentage of Jewish women for whom the age at death is mentioned is no more than 40%. This is regrettable, since we do know that women had a higher mortality rate than men due to death from childbirth and general exhaustion. So here, too, a more balanced set of data might have yielded a lower average age at death. This is not to deny, of course, that in antiquity Jewish men and women could and did reach high ages, even up to 100 years.

Finally, there is the problem of the unreliability of the indications of age at death. Far too many tombstones give ages ending in 0 or 5, especially for those above 20 years; after the age of 70 virtually all end in zero.<sup>17</sup> This simply results from a lack of knowledge of the exact age, so these indications can hardly be trusted. Furthermore, and significantly, in pagan epitaphs one finds an incredible number of extremely old people. We find mention of people aged not only 125, but also 140, 160, or even 170, and these are of course absurd exaggerations. This, however, is an aspect in which Jewish grave inscriptions do *definitely deviate* from pagan epitaphs of the same periods. Although there is much age-rounding in Jewish tomb inscriptions as well, to the best of my knowledge there are no epitaphs of which the Jewish provenance is certain and which mention people older than 120 years. Such cases of grave exaggeration do not occur. What could be the reason for this? An educated guess is that here Genesis 6:3 is lurking in the background, where God says that “their days shall be one hundred and twenty years.”<sup>18</sup> Even though some Jewish interpreters argued that this limitation applied only to the generation of the Flood, there were many others who saw it as valid for humankind in general. Most probably this biblical verse induced Jews to avoid any ascription of ages higher than 120 years to their deceased. *‘Ad me’ah we’esrim*, “to 120 years.” All in all, however hard it may be to handle the epigraphic evidence for age at death from a statistical and demographic point of view, it is the only evidence we have, so it deserves our attention.

## Professions

Another important aspect of the inscriptions is that they reveal much more about the wide variety of occupations and professions that Jews were engaged in the ancient world than the literary sources do. To give just an impression, I list here a selection of occupations in alphabetical order: actor, army-reservist, artisan, athlete, baker, banker, bank teller, blacksmith, bronze-smith, butcher, carpenter, centurion, city councilor, civil servant, commander (military), confectioner, dealer in horse fodder, doctor, donkey driver, farmer, financier, general, goldsmith, greengrocer, lawyer, lime burner, linen merchant, metalworker, moneylender, musician, painter, pearl setter, perfumer, police chief, policeman, potter, poulterer, president of the city council, procurator, purple-dyer, rag dealer, retailer, river guard, sculptor, shepherd, shipper, silk mercer, silversmith, soldier, stone-

<sup>16</sup> In some corpora of pagan epitaphs indicating age, men are 20 times more numerous than women; see Clauss 1973: 395-417, esp. 405-6.

<sup>17</sup> On this phenomenon see Duncan Jones 1977: 333-353.

<sup>18</sup> See van der Horst 2006: 66-70.

cutter, tax collector, tax farmer, teacher, tentmaker, trader, vine-dresser, viticulturalist, weaver, wine merchant.<sup>19</sup>

Noticeable in this list is firstly the fact that it covers such a wide range as far as social status is concerned; it ranges from the lowest to the highest positions on the social ladder (from rag dealer to president of the city council); secondly, there is nothing particularly Jewish about any of the occupations in which Jews were engaged. There is nothing in which pagans and Christians are not also known to have been involved.<sup>20</sup>

## Synagogues

This list of occupations makes it all the more telling fact that functions in the religious community are mentioned much more frequently than secular professions. And it is telling as well that in many inscriptions the synagogue is called “the (most) holy synagogue” or “the holy place” (or “sacred precinct”), which is a clear indication of its great importance and centrality as a religious institution.<sup>21</sup> Two inscriptions from third-century BCE Egypt are the first secure attestations of the existence of synagogues as Jewish religious buildings (*JIGRE* 22 and 117). And it is an inscription from mid-first-century CE Jerusalem that explicitly states what the synagogue had been built for: “for reading of the Law and instruction in (or: teaching of) the commandments” (*CIIP* I no. 9).<sup>22</sup> That synagogal functions are mentioned much more frequently than secular professions is indicative of their importance to the holders of these offices, who proudly mention in commemorative and honorary inscriptions that they were leader of the community, head of the synagogue, president of the council of elders, secretary or scribe of the community, father of the synagogue, elder = member of the council of elders, president or patron, singer of psalms etc.<sup>23</sup> Regrettably enough, these inscriptions often deny us any information about the duties of these offices. Neither do they tell us which offices were honorary and which were not, although we can be sure that the several cases of infant office holders (such as a leader of the synagogue aged three years; *JJWE* I 53)<sup>24</sup> were bestowed their titles because the community wanted to honor the family of the child. Even so, again, it shows us the centrality and great importance of the synagogue in the lives of individual Jews.

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<sup>19</sup> That this list contains a number of military functions may seem strange at first glance, but there is abundant evidence that Jews did indeed serve in the armies of the Greek states and the Roman Empire; see Williams 1998: 88-89, 97.

<sup>20</sup> See Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987: 116-123; Williams 1998: 19-26, 231-232; Chester 2011: 404-408.

<sup>21</sup> See Goodman 2007: 219-231; Avemarie 2009: 21-61 = Avemarie 2013, here 57-58, for references to inscriptions.

<sup>22</sup> *Eis anagnôsin nomou kai didachên entolôn*. For a bibliography of the abundant literature on this famous inscription of the *archisynagôgos* Theodotus, see Price 2010: 55-56.

<sup>23</sup> For references see van der Horst 1991: 85-101, but esp. Williams 1998: 37-50. The fullest recent treatments are Burtchaell 1992: 228-271; Levine 2000: 387-428; Claußen 2002: 256-293.

<sup>24</sup> More instances in Williams 1998: 149.

## Women leaders

It may come as a surprise that some inscriptions mention women as leaders of the synagogue.<sup>25</sup> We find women as *archisynagôgos* or *archisynagôgissa* (*IJO* I Cre3, Sophia of Gortyn; *IJO* II 25, Theopempte of Myndos; *IJO* II 43, Rufina of Smyrna);<sup>26</sup> as *presbytera* or *presbyterissa* (*JIWE* I 59, Beronike of Venosa; *JIWE* I 62, Mannina of Venosa; *JIWE* I 72, Faustina of Venosa; *JIWE* I 163, Eulogia of Malta; *IJO* I Thr3, Rebecca of Bizye; *IJO* I Cre3, again Sophia of Gortyn; etc.); as *matêr synagôgês* (*JIWE* II 251, Simplicia of Rome; *JIWE* II 542, Marcella of Rome; *JIWE* II 577, the proselyte (!) Veturia Paula of Rome; *JIWE* II 5, Coelia Paterna of Brescia; etc.).<sup>27</sup> So women may have fulfilled leadership roles in diaspora communities. This has been denied, however, by scholars who see in such titles nothing but honorary designations without real responsibilities or offices involved, possibly given to these women because *their husbands* were the real functionaries. In that case, these women were not office holders at all. However, it is significant that in other cases where wives of male functionaries *are* mentioned, they never bear a title themselves. And we should also bear in mind that “if the title were merely honorific for women, we should expect a considerably greater number to be attested.”<sup>28</sup> So even when the use of synagogal functions as honorary titles is attested (after Greek and especially Roman models<sup>29</sup>), as is certainly the case in those instances in which very young infants receive synagogal titles, this does not exclude the possibility that in the non-rabbinic synagogues of the Western diaspora, women had more opportunities to climb the social ladder in their communities than was possible elsewhere, especially in Palestine.

## Epithets referring to the Torah

Attachment to the Jewish community, with its value system based upon the Torah, is also apparent from telling epithets that several of the deceased are adorned with in their epitaphs. We find designations which are very unusual, or even non-existent, in the non-Jewish ancient world, such as *philosynagôgos* (loving the synagogue/community, *JIWE* II 271 [Rome]), *philonomos* (loving the Torah, *JIWE* II 212, 502 [Rome]), *philentol(i)os* (loving the commandments, *JIWE* I 163 [Malta]; *JIWE* II 240,<sup>30</sup> 281, 564, 576

<sup>25</sup> See Brooten 1982. See the discussion of this epigraphic material in Kraemer 1992, 106-127. For new material published after Brooten’s 1982 book see Williams 2004/2005: 30. For criticism of Brooten 1982, see Horbury 1999: 358-401. Note that one finds these inscriptions only in the Greek diaspora, not in Jewish Palestine.

<sup>26</sup> If *archêgissa* is an abbreviation of *archisynagôgissa*, as suggested by de Lange (2001: 52-53), Peristeria of Phthiotic Thebes (*IJO* I Ach18) would be another candidate.

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that the function of mother of the synagogue might also be implied in those cases where women are called just “mother.”

<sup>28</sup> Horsley 1987: 219.

<sup>29</sup> On the Graeco-Roman models see Kleywegt 1991: 247-272.

<sup>30</sup> In this remarkable epitaph, the deceased, the *archôn* Priscus, is said to have been *philolaos*, *philentolos*, *philopenês*. Cf. *JIWE* II 576. Note that *Philentolios* and *Philonomios* were also used as proper names.

[Rome and of unknown provenance]), *philopenês* (loving the poor, *JJWE* II 240 [Rome]), *philogeitôn* (loving neighbors, *JIGRE* 84 [Leontopolis]), etc. It is also noteworthy that the daughter of a Roman “father of the synagogue” is said to “have lived a good life in Judaism” or to “have lived a good Jewish life” (*kalôs biôsasa en tôi Ioudaïsmôi*, in *JJWE* II 584). A Macedonian father of the synagogue in Stobi proudly states that he “lived all [his] life according to [the prescriptions of] Judaism” (*IJO* I Mac1: *politeusamenos pasan tèn politeian kata ton Ioudaïsmôn*). These epithets and statements reveal a strong sense of Jewish identity and of attachment to the Jewish tradition on the part of diaspora Jews. It is clear from this evidence that the Torah had taken center stage in the world of these Jews. About the centrality of the Torah the epigraphic record leaves us in no doubt. This is also made abundantly clear by the occurrence of synagogal functions such as *nomodidaskalos* (teacher of the Torah), *didaskalos nomomathês* (teacher and scholar of the Torah), and the frequent depiction of the Torah shrine on tombstones.<sup>31</sup>

## Non-rabbinic Judaism

In view of all this, another aspect of Jewish life on which inscriptions shed light is all the more striking, namely, the *non-rabbinic* nature of diaspora Judaism in this period. The inscriptions strongly suggest that by and large diaspora communities remained outside the sphere of influence of the rabbis till the early Middle Ages. To be sure, there are some 60 inscriptions that do mention “rabbis,” but the vast majority (more than 50) are from Palestine and, moreover, it is far from certain whether the persons designated *rabbi* were rabbis in the technical sense of ordained community leaders.<sup>32</sup> In the first place, in antiquity the term *rabbi* was applied to anyone of high standing in the community, and hence it very often had the meaning of “important person.”<sup>33</sup> Secondly, it is the inscriptions themselves that make it clear that the real community leaders were the *archisynagôgoi*, the *gerousiarchai* etc. The “rabbis” mentioned in inscriptions almost always appear as donors, *not* as leaders of the synagogue, so it does not make any sense to assume that all “epigraphical rabbis” in antiquity were Talmudic scholars.<sup>34</sup> Even if some of the very few “rabbis” mentioned in diaspora Jewish inscriptions may perhaps have been rabbis in our sense of the word,<sup>35</sup> it is clear that the term “rabbinic Judaism” would be totally out of place as a characterization of the many Jewish communities in the western diaspora. These diaspora communities often flourished for centuries without any rabbis being around, let alone leading the communities. This also explains why there are no inscriptions outside Palestine that reflect any specifically rabbinic ideas or practices. This is in such a marked contrast to the eastern Aramaic-speaking diaspora that some scholars speak of a split diaspora, a Semitic-speaking diaspora that was dominated by rabbis in

<sup>31</sup> References in Williams 1999: 83.

<sup>32</sup> See Cohen 1981/1982: 1-17.

<sup>33</sup> Thus Levine 1989: 15.

<sup>34</sup> Thus rightly Cohen 1981/1982: 14. Also Williams 1999: 80.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. *JJWE* I 22 (Brusciano, 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> cent.), 36 (Naples, 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cent.?), 86 (Venosa, 6<sup>th</sup> cent.), 186 (Taragona, 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cent.?).



the East and a non-rabbinic Greek-speaking diaspora in the West.<sup>36</sup> The vast majority of the Jews in the Roman Empire never saw a rabbi and never heard of the Talmud.

## Manumission of slaves

A further aspect that deserves our attention is that it is only through epigraphical evidence that we learn about the release rituals (manumissions) of Jewish slaves. This evidence mainly comes from Delphi and the Bosphoran Kingdom.<sup>37</sup> For instance, from a second-century BCE inscription found at Delphi we learn that the slave, “*Ioudaios* by name, *Ioudaios* by race,”<sup>38</sup> was sold to the god Apollo (!, *IJO* I Ach42), a not uncommon manumission procedure at the time among Greeks (see also Ach43 and 44). Even though the involvement of Apollo was probably on the initiative of the manumitter, it is revealing to read in another inscription that the liberated slave, Moschus, who is explicitly identified as a Jew, set up a stêlê on which he states that he had a dream in which the Greek gods Amphiarus and Hygieia ordered him to record his manumission on the stone and set it up by their altar (Ach45, 3rd cent. BCE). This is striking in what it tells us about the degree of assimilation that was possible among Jewish slaves of pagan owners. In the Bosphoran inscriptions (most of them from the first cent. CE) we find that Jewish slaves were set free in the prayer-house (*proseuchê* = synagogue) and that the community of the Jews (*synagôgê tôn Ioudaiôn*) provided guardianship (e.g. *IJO* I BS5-7).<sup>39</sup> This final remark means that “the synagogue is bound to uphold the contract between owner and now freed slave.”<sup>40</sup> Some other Bosphoran manumissions, however, state that the Jewish slaves were set free “under [the gods] Zeus, Gê, and Helios” (*IJO* I BS20, 22), a common pagan Greek juridical phrasing, even though the transaction took place in the synagogue.<sup>41</sup> Whether the Jewish participants attached much significance to such terms may be doubted, as too may the many instances of the Latin wording *dis manibus* (*DM*), “to the gods of the netherworld,” on so many tombstones in the Jewish catacombs of Rome.

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<sup>36</sup> See Edre and Mendels 2007: 91-137; 2008: 163-187; also Mendels and Edrei 2010. A recent attempt by Collar (2013: 146-223) to demonstrate that soon after 70 CE the Western diaspora also came under rabbinic sway is in my view utterly unconvincing. Collar bases her theory of the rabbinic nature of the Western diaspora (partly inspired by Feldman 1993) on the epigraphic evidence, but she heavily overinterprets it.

<sup>37</sup> The relevant material can be found in *IJO* I Ach42-45, BS5-9, 17-25; see also Gibson 1999. In the Indices of *IJO* I (at pp. 392-4) one can find a very useful and complete survey of the terms and conditions of manumission of Jewish slaves.

<sup>38</sup> For *Ioudaios* as both a name and an ethnic label see Williams 1997: 249-262 = Williams 2013: 267-288. Slaves often got ethnic personal names.

<sup>39</sup> It is somewhat confusing that the editors of *IJO* I use the abbreviation BS for Black Sea, while BS is also the current shorthand for the Beth She’arim inscriptions.

<sup>40</sup> Gibson 1999: 150.

<sup>41</sup> See Williams 1998: 123; Gibson 1999: 119-121.

## Pagan donors

Again another area that Jewish literary sources are silent about is that of pagan donors of synagogues. The best-known example is mentioned in the New Testament. In his Gospel, Luke tells of a Roman centurion in Capernaum. The local Jews of the town urge Jesus to help the man by healing his beloved slave, saying: “He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our people and it is he who built our synagogue for us” (7: 4-5). We also have epigraphical attestation of this phenomenon. An inscription from Acmonia in Phrygia says that the synagogue built by Julia Severa was restored by some prominent members of the local Jewish community who were honored for this by the community (*IJO* II 168).<sup>42</sup> Julia Severa happens to be well-known to us. In the middle of the first century CE she was priestess of the local emperor cult. So she was not Jewish, but played a prominent role in a pagan cult. Even so, this inscription testifies to her interest in and sympathy for the Jewish community: she had its synagogue built at her own cost. Julia Severa was a woman from an aristocratic family (her son later became a senator in Rome), a lady who had close ties to members of the distinguished Roman family of the Turronii: one of them, Turronius Rapo, was a priest of the emperor cult as well, and he is mentioned together with Julia Severa on coins of the city; but another member of that family, Turronius Cladus, is mentioned in our inscription as the “head of the synagogue” who saw to it that the restoration was carried out properly.<sup>43</sup> He must, then, have been a proselyte. The fact that here a socially very prominent woman from a distinguished family with an explicitly pagan role in the city makes such a generous gesture towards the Jewish community bespeaks a very successful integration of the Acmonian Jews and the sympathy they had earned with the non-Jewish inhabitants. Here a single inscription provides us with a unique insight into gentile-Jewish relations in first-century CE Asia Minor.<sup>44</sup>

## Scriptural quotations

Contrary to what we find in Christian epitaphs, biblical quotes in Jewish inscriptions are few and far between, but they do yield important information about the ongoing use of the various Greek Bible translations in the ancient diaspora.<sup>45</sup> The most often quoted biblical text is Prov. 10:7, “May the memory of the righteous one be (for) a blessing.”<sup>46</sup> This is quoted only rarely in Hebrew, but more frequently in both the Greek version of the LXX and in the translation of Aquila, sometimes in a mixed form of both (occasion-

<sup>42</sup> See also Lifshitz 1967: 34-36 (no. 33).

<sup>43</sup> See Mitchell 1993: 9.

<sup>44</sup> As does the great donor inscription from Aphrodisias [*IJO* II 14] for a later period.

<sup>45</sup> See Cappelletti 2009: 128-141 (limited to only one biblical quote); also van der Horst 2013: 363-376 = van der Horst 2014: 66-79.

<sup>46</sup> The second biblical text in frequency is 1 Sam. 25:29: “May the soul of my lord be bound in the bundle of life.” This has become, in various forms, the standard text on numerous Jewish tombstones in medieval and modern times.

ally in Latin).<sup>47</sup> The importance of this observation is that it enables us to see that in some Jewish communities the LXX was not discarded when Aquila's version became available, as is so often mistakenly assumed. A variety of Greek Bible versions remained in use, not only in antiquity but also in the medieval period.<sup>48</sup> This use also indicates that these communities probably held their synagogal services in Greek (as was also the case in some areas of Palestine).<sup>49</sup>

## Afterlife

Finally, some brief remarks on expressions of belief in the afterlife in epitaphs are in order.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, the vast majority of tomb inscriptions are disappointingly silent about such a belief.<sup>51</sup> Those that do yield information about some forms of belief in the afterlife, however, show a great variety of ideas. The Jewish literary sources from the Hellenistic and Roman period sometimes create the impression that most Jews believed in either the resurrection of the body or the immortality of the soul (or related concepts such as astral immortality, e.g. *IJO* II 236), but the inscriptions clearly show that in this period many Jews still stuck to the pessimistic image that the Hebrew Bible pictures of humans' fate after death, that of a somber "life" in a gloomy netherworld (*She'ol*). Sometimes one finds a downright denial of afterlife reminiscent of what we know about the Sadducees.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, the large number of epitaphs from Beth She'arim containing the term *eumoirei* ("may your lot be good"<sup>53</sup>) are probably best interpreted as indicating a belief in life after death. Also, the many inscriptions (especially from Rome) in which the deceased's relatives wish that "his/her sleep may be in peace" are open to an eschatological interpretation, although that is a much debated issue. But there is less than a handful of inscriptions that do explicitly state that resurrection of the body was what one hoped for or believed in (see *JJWE* II 103; *BS* II 162, 194). Even though it will always remain impossible to say how representative the beliefs expressed in these inscriptions are for the Jewish people as a whole, there can be little doubt that here, too, we can at least see that a wide variety of ideas about and attitudes toward life after death continued to be a feature of Judaism till the end of antiquity (and even later).

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. *JJWE* I 120, 122, 131, 133, 137; *JJWE* II 112, 276, 307; *IJO* I Cre3.

<sup>48</sup> This is the purport of various contributions to the volume edited by Nicholas de Lange et al. 2009. See also Rajak 2009: 305-306.

<sup>49</sup> On synagogue services in Greek, see van der Horst 2001: 184 = van der Horst 2002: 19.

<sup>50</sup> See Fischer 1978: 215-254; van der Horst 1991: 114-126; Park 2000; Rutgers 2000: 293-310.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, "97% of the roughly six hundred Jewish funerary inscriptions from Rome does not refer to the afterlife" (Rutgers 2000: 297). See also Williams 1999: 90-91. For a contrary opinion (inspired by J.-B. Frey), see Lifshitz 1961: 401-411, who overinterprets the evidence rather wishfully.

<sup>52</sup> See on these cases esp. Ch. 3 in Park 2000. At p. 202 Park concludes that "it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that roughly between 200 B.C. and A.D. 400, a significant number of people who considered themselves to be Jews either denied, or held to a minimal conception of, afterlife."

<sup>53</sup> "Lot" reminds one of the use of Hebrew *cheleq* for a blessed afterlife (e.g., m. *Sanhedrin* 10.1).

## Judaeo-Greek culture after 70 CE

The most important aspect of the study of Jewish inscriptions in Greek is that they reveal to us a world of Judaeo-Greek culture that we would not know otherwise. Many scholars tend to think that the various forms of Judaeo-Greek cultural synthesis that came into being and flourished in the centuries between 300 BCE and 100 CE disappeared completely after the first century. It is for this reason, so it is assumed, that we do not know any Jewish literature in Greek after Josephus: Jews simply stopped writing in Greek by the end of the first century CE and apparently chose to express their Judaism in the Hebrew and Aramaic of the rabbinic literature. As Martin Goodman has rightly emphasized, this assumption “is contradicted by the thousands of Greek inscriptions set up by Mediterranean Jews between the second and sixth centuries CE.”<sup>54</sup> Why Judaeo-Greek literature from these later centuries was not preserved by the Jews is a much debated matter that cannot be dealt with here.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, what we learn from ancient Jewish inscriptions is, *inter multa alia*, that there was a huge, mainly Greek-speaking diaspora in the West, not dominated by rabbis, with a flourishing culture, reading their Bible in one of the available Greek versions, in varying degrees of acculturation but often quite well integrated in Graeco-Roman society, with a characteristic onomastic tradition, with religious communities where at some places women possibly had opportunities to have a leadership role, but with as high an infant mortality as everywhere else in the Roman Empire. In short, inscriptions are better than literary sources at bringing before our eyes the extraordinary diversity of Jewish life and thought in late antiquity.

Much more could be said about this important subject. I hope, however, that the small selection of evidence presented here suffices to make it clear that ancient Jewish epigraphy is a very relevant area of research in the study of early Judaism.

## ABBREVIATIONS

*CIIP* – H. Cotton et alii (eds.), *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, Berlin – New York 2010.

*IJO* – D. Noy et alii (eds.), *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, 3 vols., Tübingen 2004-2010.

*JIGRE* – W. Horbury, D. Noy (eds.), *Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Cambridge 1993.

*JIWE* – D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, 2 vols., Cambridge 2005.

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<sup>54</sup> Goodman 2010: 67.

<sup>55</sup> Goodman 2010: 84, suggests that the loss of this literature is due to the lack of interest on the part of the rabbis who wanted to preserve only writings in Hebrew and Aramaic (and, I would add, only writings that conformed to, and confirmed, their own ideas). “What they did not need to know they allowed to lapse into oblivion,” says Tessa Rajak (2009: 6).

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