

## SYNAGOGUE INSCRIPTIONS IN PALESTINE – A STYLISTIC CLASSIFICATION

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Inscriptions are of great importance for they give a direct testimony of the age in which they were set down. Once the letters are put on stone or in mosaic, they cannot change and the student of the age finds the ancient message exactly as it was originally formulated. Such evidence is especially important when it comes from a period whose main documentation is literary. In such a case, the comparison between literary and epigraphic documents is most illuminating. Palestine in the post-Amoraic period is an unusually complex example. On the one hand, there is the great bulk of Rabbinic traditions contained in the Talmud and ancient Palestinian Midrashim which belong to the Amoraic period. However, the synagogue inscriptions of Palestine do not belong to precisely this period, but rather to the post-Amoraic period and this is quite an obscure age. It is known for its collecting and editing activities, for the compilation of the Talmud and the Midrashim. It is famous for its care in transmitting the biblical text; this is the period of the Masoretes who developed special signs to indicate the exact vocalization and the correct method of reciting the Bible in the synagogue. These epigonic activities belong to a pivotal era in the course of Jewish history, for the Byzantine epoch and first part of the Arabic epoch in Jewish Palestine is a formative era for later Judaism. Every major literary work bears the silent imprint of this period. Yet we know so little about its people and about their spiritual and intellectual life and such knowledge is most important for a correct evaluation of their share in those works, such as the Talmud and Midrashim, to which they gave a final form. For this reason, inscriptions from synagogues and academies are of special importance as they testify to intellectual life.

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Unfortunately, the field of synagogue inscriptions has been in the past somewhat neglected.<sup>1</sup> "Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues in Palestine" is the title of a small article published by the late Samuel Klein over fifty years ago.<sup>2</sup> Klein attempted to collect all the known inscriptions whose number at that time had not reached thirty. Since then, in the course of the rebuilding of Eretz Yisrael, remnants of its ancient culture have been uncovered. The field of Palestinian epigraphy has received a special impetus during the last few years with the many discoveries in the Golan in the North and in Judaea in the South. Thus, the number of known synagogue inscriptions has quadrupled. However, these important discoveries were published in numerous journals and until recently no real effort had been made to re-examine all the material and evaluate the finds while attending to the scientific tools of palaeography and epigraphy. For this reason, students of this material owe a great debt to Joseph Naveh for his work, *On Stone and Mosaic – The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues* (Jerusalem 1978, Hebrew).<sup>3</sup> Naveh has not only collected in one volume all the known Aramaic and Hebrew synagogue inscriptions from Palestine, but invested all possible efforts in re-reading the material and interpreting it anew accordingly. It must be noted, that despite its merits, this important work does not contain all the dedication and construction inscriptions from synagogues in Palestine. Naveh excluded inscriptions written in Greek. However, these do not comprise more than about one quarter of the one hundred and twenty or so Palestinian synagogue inscriptions. Moreover, an almost complete collection of Greek dedication inscriptions is available in the important work of B. Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives* (Paris 1967), of which nos. 64-81 are from Palestine. The recent publication by F. Hüttenmeister and G. Reeg, *Die antiken Synagogen in Israel* (Wiesbaden 1977, Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des vorderen Orients), which concerns itself with all kinds of sources, literary as well as archaeological, relating to ancient synagogues, while placing no special emphasis on epigraphical finds, does contain some additional Greek synagogue inscriptions which are published and translated for the first time.<sup>4</sup>

The corpus of Aramaic and Hebrew inscriptions presented in Naveh's work represents the majority of synagogue inscriptions from Palestine (N 1-87, 107-110). In contrast to inscriptions from the Diaspora, which were written mostly in Greek, the language of the synagogue inscriptions of Palestine is generally Aramaic. The Greek synagogue inscriptions from Palestine, few as they may be, are of great importance

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1. Without diminishing the importance of P.J. Frey's comprehensive *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, Vol. II Asie-Afrique (Rome 1952) which appeared thirteen years after the author's untimely death.

2. *Writings of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Bulletin of the Institute of Jewish Studies* 2 (1925), pp. 23-45.

3. Additional discussion of Naveh's book may be found in my review in *Kiryath Sefer* 13 (1978), pp. 349-355 (Hebrew).

4. For the sake of brevity, Semitic inscriptions will be cited by their number in Naveh's work (N 1, 2, etc.) and Greek inscriptions by their number in Lifshitz' work (L 1, 2, etc.) or by the relevant page number in Hüttenmeister and Reeg's work (H. 233 etc.).

for purposes of comparison. A stylistic examination of the various characteristics of the inscriptions – Semitic and Greek, their formulae and position within the synagogue, can enrich our understanding of this important material. Such an approach can teach us much about the life of Palestinian Jewry in the twilight of the Talmudic period and in the period afterwards when the literary sources at our disposal become fewer. On stylistic grounds, it is possible to divide the inscriptions into four main categories: artisans' inscriptions, private inscriptions, community inscriptions and literary inscriptions. Let us begin with the inscriptions of a particular artisan, Jose bar Levi.

Much can be learned about the status of the various languages in Palestine from the relationship between them as revealed in the inscriptions. Thus, for example, Jose bar Levi records on the lintels which he built in Kefar Baram and Alma (N 1, [3]) the blessing in Hebrew: *yhy štwm b[ʔ]-hmqwm hzh wb[ʔ]-kl mqwmwt [ʔmw] ysr'l*, “May there be peace in [on] this place and in [on] all places of [His people] Israel”. In Kefar Baram he memorializes his own part in the work by continuing with the Hebrew formula: *ywsh hlvy bn lvy 'sh hšqwf hzh*, “Jose the Levite ben Levi made this lintel”. In Alma, however, he concludes the Hebrew blessing with the concluding formula “Amen, Selah”, and then continues in more intimate fashion in the first person and in Aramaic: *'nh ywsh br lvy hlvy[y] 'wmnh d'vdt [hdyn šqwfh]*, “I, Jose bar Levi the Levite, am the artisan who made [this lintel]”. Through this interesting change, it seems that Jose b. Levi reveals his attitude to the two languages. Hebrew is for him an official language, a literary language, while Aramaic is a more intimate language, more suited for a formula in the first person. It is not surprising, therefore, that the few Hebrew inscriptions should have been influenced by Aramaic.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Aramaic word *bar*, “son”, is found not only in Aramaic inscriptions but in Hebrew inscriptions as well. So we find that a person from Susiya is called in an Aramaic inscription (N 82): *ywdn lvyv' br šm[wn]*, “Yudan the Levite bar Shimon”, while in a Hebrew inscription (N 80) from the same synagogue the same person is called: *ywdn hlvy br šm'wn*. It is interesting to note that the Aramaic title *lvyv'* appears in the Hebrew inscription in its Hebrew equivalent *hlvy*,<sup>6</sup> while the Aramaic *br* does not change.

Some of the artisans who inscribed Hebrew and Aramaic dedications, sign their names in Greek, a fact of considerable importance in evaluating the Aramaic inscriptions they produced. At Beit Alpha (N 43), for example, there is appended to the Aramaic construction inscription, a Greek inscription of the artisans Marianus and his son Ḥanina (an obviously Jewish name).<sup>7</sup> Also at Daburah (N 7) in the

5. See Naveh's discussion of the inscription at Kefar Niburaia (N 13): *lmspr-lmny* and *kwtylw* instead of *ktlyw* at Khirbet Susiya (N 75) and his introduction, p. 16.

6. However, this Hebrew title, *hlvy*, which is connected to the sphere of ritual, is also found at times in Aramaic inscriptions, such as Alma (N 3) and Hamath Gader (N 33).

7. Marianus and Ḥanina his son also appear in Greek inscriptions from Beth-Shean; see N. Zori, “The Ancient Synagogue at Beth-Shean”, *Eretz-Israel* 8 (1967), p. 159 (Hebrew). On the artisans' practices of signing their work in the Greek inscriptions, see M. Schwabe, “On the Greek Inscriptions of Beth-Alpha”, *Tarbiz* 1 (1930), pp. 138-139 (Hebrew).

Golan, the artisan Rostikos who inscribed an Aramaic dedication, signed afterwards in Greek.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, there are Aramaic inscriptions, like that at Maon (N 57) which are so poorly transcribed that it is obvious that they were produced by an artisan who was totally unfamiliar with the shapes of the Aramaic characters. Important also are the mistakes in the Aramaic inscription left by an artisan in the synagogue at Beth-Shean (N 47). The Aramaic community inscription there (N 46): "Remembered for good (are) all the members of the holy group" is free from mistakes because it was most likely formulated by the leaders of the community. However, when the artisan, who produced the work, includes himself in the blessing, we find his addition on the side of the mosaic full of mistakes: *dkyr l'v 'wmmh d'vd hdh 'vydth*, "Remember for good (is) the artisan who made this work". The artisan intending to write *hdh 'vydth*, "this work" spelled, it seems, according to the popular pronunciation, an *aleph* instead of an *aiyn*, and made a hypercorrection of *hdh* to *hdh*. As E.Y. Kutscher has pointed out texts which testify to a confusion of the gutturals and pharyngeals stem from the Hellenized strata among the Jews of Palestine.<sup>9</sup>

As a category, the community inscriptions are stylistically distinct from the artisans' inscriptions. The community inscriptions have more or less established formulae in Aramaic, and memorialize primarily the efforts of the community in construction and renovation. This latter content reflects, among other things, the reaction of the Jews to the decrees of the Byzantine emperors who forbade the erection of new synagogues, but permitted their renovation.<sup>10</sup> Some of these inscriptions are phrased in accordance with the decrees concerning repairs.<sup>11</sup> The community inscriptions generally mention only the installation of a new mosaic in the synagogue and even this only after great communal effort. So, for example, in Jericho (N 69): "Remembered be for good, may their memory be for good, the entire holy community, the great with the small, whom the King of the Universe aided, who supported and made the mosaic...".

The community inscriptions serve a double purpose. On the one hand they extend a blessing to the members of the community who were equal to the task and

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8. At Hamath Tiberias (N 24) was found, together with an Aramaic dedication, also a decorated marble slab with a Greek inscription which reads: "(May) the grace of God be with Abraham the marble-worker". See M. Schwabe, "A Collection of Jewish Inscriptions from Palestine", *Bulletin of the Israel Exploration Society* 18 (1953-1954), pp. 161-162 (Hebrew).

9. E.Y. Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll* (Leiden 1974), pp. 57-60.

10. See M. Avi-Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine – A Political History from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (New York 1976), pp. 218-220, 227, 239.

11. See Beth-Shean (N 46) and the unpublished community inscription of En-Gedi. See D. Barag, Y. Porat and E. Netzer, "The Second Season of Excavations in the Synagogue at En-Gedi", *Qadmoniot* 5 (1972), p. 53 (Hebrew). *kl bny hvwrth qdyšth*, "all the members of the holy group", in the inscription at Beth-Shean signifies neither Torah scholars nor, necessarily, leaders of the local academy. In this period it is the unordained students who belong to the *havurah*, "group", and among them there are *hvryy' rvrvyy'* "great members", or "associates" and also *hvryy' z'yryy'*, "minor members". See J. Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs* (New York, 1920) Vol. I, p. 54, n. 2.

brought the synagogue into a state of repair. On the other hand, these inscriptions seek to encourage potential contributors to make additional contributions. Characteristic of the first purpose is the inscription from Ḥusifah (N 39) which mentions: "...all the members of the village, great and small, who pledged and fulfilled their pledge". The inscription from Jericho (N 69) mentioned above, which is prominently placed at the entrance of the synagogue includes in the blessing "the entire holy community... whom the King of the Universe aided" and continues, "May He who knows their names, the names of their children and the members of their household, inscribe them in the Book of Life [with all] the righteous". The inscriptions of Hamat Tiberias (N 26) and Naaran (N 64) combine both purposes by mentioning both past and future contributions. So the prominently placed Naaran inscription states: "Remembered for good (are) 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". Community inscriptions which were also, at times, building inscriptions,<sup>12</sup> were, as has been noted, prominently placed in the synagogue. Each synagogue had, it seems, no more than one inscription of this type.

In distinct contrast to the community inscriptions are the private dedication inscriptions which surround the community inscriptions and are usually written in the spoken Aramaic dialect of Palestine.<sup>13</sup> In some places the private inscriptions are written in Greek. So, for example, in Hamath Tiberias the Aramaic community inscription (N 26) is surrounded by no less than ten Greek inscriptions from private contributors and supporters. On the other hand, at Naaran the community inscription (N 64) is surrounded by exclusively Aramaic inscriptions.

The private inscriptions are usually short. Regardless of their respect for the contributors, the communities did not hesitate, in the course of time, to remove a private inscription and set a new one in its place. We find, for example at Naaran (N 65) a crookedly inscribed dedication which begins with a corruption, *dʿyr lʿty* (instead of *dkyr lʿty*). This inscription was apparently installed over an earlier inscription which fit the framework well, the remains of which are still apparent in the word *dky[r]* in the upper righthand corner. Chance and changing circumstances certainly contributed much to the formulation of these inscriptions. This is recognizable, at times, even in the language and formulation of the inscriptions. So, we find at Naaran, below an inscription (N 58) which reads, "Remembered for good (is) Phineas bar Justus...", an inscription also for his wife (N 59), "Remembered for good (is) Rebecca his wife." However, it seems that this Phineas, in the course of time, felt that it was not sufficiently clear precisely whose wife was referred to.

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12. See, for example, the inscription from Kefar Niburaia (N 13), of 564 C.E.

13. See, for example, the third person past plural form: *yhwvn*, "they gave" which appears in the private inscriptions of Hamath Gader (N 32-34) at least three times with the final letter *nun*. Whereas, in Maon (N 57), the inscription formulated by the community leaders reads: "Remembered for good (are) all the community who made (*d'vʿdw*) ...who gave (*dyhwv*)". Dialectical forms also appear in some community inscriptions; see Jericho (N 69).

It is possible that for this reason he added to the end of the second inscription the name Phineas, so that it concludes: ...*'tth pynhs*, "...his wife, Phineas". Here the weak syntax of this formulation reflects the various metamorphoses of the private dedication inscriptions.

The private dedication inscriptions reflect the particular atmosphere and climate of certain synagogues. In Hamath Gader, for example, the community primarily memorialized the contributions of non-residents, who, it seems, came to bathe in the therapeutic springs there. For this purpose, use was made of a narrow strip along the frame of the mosaic (N 33). In the four lines in the frame are squeezed in no less than five dedications, four of which end with the blessing: *mlk 'lmh ytn brkth b'mlh(wn) 'mn ('mn) slh (slwm)*, "May the King of the Universe grant blessing upon their deeds, Amen (Amen) Selah (Shalom)". In the fifth and final inscription (N34) there was no room for blessings, but the 'yry' who gave one *trimission* (Greek, *trimission*) are memorialized. The donors are identified by their home cities: Sephoris, Kefar Akabia, Capernaum, Emmaus, Arbel. Afterwards, the amount of money they contributed is specified and finally comes the characteristic blessing of the Hamath Gader inscription: "May the King of the Universe extend a blessing upon their works"; By means of this formula, the community apparently wished to bless contributors that their contribution should not diminish their wealth but rather that God should repay their expenditure.

Many private inscriptions are placed on synagogue columns. These inscriptions are marked by their simplicity, a sign, perhaps, of their antiquity. On a column in Apeca (N 28) in the Golan, a *hazzan* (i.e. synagogue functionary) announces: *'nh yhw dh hz'nh*, "I (am) Judah the *hazzan*". Generally, however, we find the form: "X son of Y made this" (N 12) or "X son of Y made this column" (N 18, 40). An inscription at Umm-el-'Amed (N 20) mentions that Joezer the *hazzan* and his brother Simeon *'vdw hdn tk' dmry šwmy*, "made this *tk'* of the Master of Heaven". Naveh's reading, *tk'* rather than *tr'*, and his explanation that this is the Greek word *thēcē* and refers to the ark in which the Torah scrolls were kept seem correct. It would seem that the synagogue officials referred to in these inscriptions are not those who actually constructed the columns but rather those responsible for having them constructed. This is particularly clear where the artisan's inscription in Greek is appended to the Aramaic construction inscription, such as at Dabburah (N 7): *'l'zr br[...r]bh 'vd 'mwdyh d'l mn kfth wpz[ymyh]... [Ro]ysticos ect[isen]*, "Eleazar the son of [...the gl]reat made the columns above the arches and the beams...Rusticos built".<sup>14</sup>

The fact that the verb *'vd* does not necessarily indicate the actual physical making of something has been previously mentioned and Naveh discusses this matter in his introduction under the heading "Verbs which Indicate the Giving of Contributions"

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14. See D. Urman, "Jewish Inscriptions from Dabbura in the Golan", *Israel Exploration Journal* 22 (1972), p. 17, n. 7.

(pp. 9-11). However, it seems that the subject has not yet been exhausted. A private inscription from Eshtamoa (N 75) uses the Hebrew *'sh*, "he made" to describe the contribution of: "The holy master, Rabbi Issi the honoured priest *byrby* who made this mosaic". Naveh emphasises that the verb "made" here refers to a contribution, an interpretation that is supported by what follows in the inscription. However, this verb has additional meanings. So, for example in a burial cave in Beth-Shearim we find the following inscription: "This is the coffin of Rabbi Hillel the son of Rabbi Levy who made (*'sh*) this cave". Here the word *'sh* cannot refer to a contribution. Rather, it would appear that Rabbi Hillel had the burial chamber dug out and prepared for him and his family after having purchased the cave. For this reason he is considered to have "made" it.<sup>15</sup> Also instructive in this regard are some lines written by the liturgical poet Yannai, who, being a local contemporary of these inscriptions, certainly saw in the synagogues in which he was active inscriptions which employed the expression *š'sh/š'vd*. Yannai interprets the verse "For the tabernacle of the Lord which Moses made..." (I Chronicles 21:29) as referring to the support and encouragement given by a community leader. Since Moses did not actually build the tabernacle himself,

Know that anyone who supports something, it is named after him; All that he supported was called after him.<sup>16</sup>

The expression *hyh mthzq b...*, which already appears in the Bible meaning "he supported" (see II Samuel 3:6), is also quite commonplace in synagogue inscriptions. So for example we find in Naaran (N 60): "Remembered for good (is) Ḥalifu the daughter of Rabbi Safra who supported (*d'thẓqt*) this (*bhdyn*) holy place". Occasionally, the Aramaic verb *'thzq* or the Hebrew *hhzyq* compliments the Aramaic verb *'vd* or the Hebrew *'sh*. So for example at Abelin (N 21): *dhkh 'thzq w'vd*, "who here supported and (had) made" (cf. N 69, 76). In such cases, it seems that *'thzq* serves as a complimentary verb appended to the main verb and implies that the one mentioned did not actually do the work himself but supported (i.e. contributed to) the construction. Also instructive in this regard is a particular formula in the private inscription from Eshtamoa (N 75), mentioned above, which continues: "...who made (*š'sh*) this mosaic and plastered its walls with plaster just as he had pledged (*mh šntndv*) at the wedding of Rabbi Johanan the priest, the scribe *byrby* his son". The two verbs *'sh...mh šntndv* are surprisingly reminiscent of the conventional Greek expression found also in Palestinian synagogue inscriptions: *eyxamenos epoiēse*, "having pledged, he fulfilled".<sup>17</sup> Also at Hamath Tiberias we find the formula *eychomenos epoiēsen* repeated five times, this being the formula

15. See N. Avigad, *Beth Shearim* (Jerusalem 1972), Vol. III, pp. 186-187. On *'sh* indicating purchase, see Naveh's introduction, p. 9.

16. *Piyyute Yannai*, ed. M. Zulai (Berlin 1938), p. 109 l. 35. See also *A Collection of Geniza Fragments of Piyyute Yannai*, ed. J. Yahalom (Jerusalem 1978), p. 85. The various midrashim which deal with this question do not make use of the verse in Chronicles; see *Tanḥuma Naso*' 13 (in ed. Buber, *Naso*' 20); *Exodus Rabbah* 35:3, etc.

17. See M. Schwabe, "The synagogue of Caesarea and its Inscriptions", *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, Hebrew Section (New York 1950), p. 437.

reserved for private persons as opposed to the work of community leaders which is memorialized in a different way.<sup>18</sup> It would appear, therefore, that the form *mh š...* should be read not *mah she...* (“that which”) but rather *mishshe...* (“just as”). If so, this is perhaps the earliest evidence of this form which, as Henoah Yalon has pointed out, is found in ancient manuscripts of Palestinian Midrashim.<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, Aramaic formulaic influenced the formulation of Greek inscriptions in Palestine. The most frequent introductory phrase in synagogue inscriptions: *dkyr ltv*, “Remembered for good” or in a more expanded form: *dkyr ltv wlvrrkh*, “Remembered for good and blessing” have exact parallels in the introductory formulae of Greek inscriptions in Palestine, as at Hamath Tiberias (H 171): *Mnēsthēi eis agathon cai eis eylogian* and at other places in Palestine (L 77b, 69). The introductory term *Mnēsthēi* is, in itself, characteristic of Eastern dedication formulae<sup>20</sup>, but the complete formula is not known in Greek outside of Palestine where it has exact parallels in Aramaic and Hebrew.<sup>21</sup>

Most important for our understanding of the spiritual and cultural life in Palestine in this sparsely documented period are the literary inscriptions. Such inscriptions are normally written in Hebrew, as Naveh notes in his introduction (pp. 6-7). However, another characteristic of these inscriptions is their list-like character. Such lists seem made up in order to fill certain sections of mosaics according to the size of the section and according to stylistic criteria. The synagogue inscriptions at En Gedi (N 70) contain five literary lists: the thirteen primeval patriarchs (see I Chronicles 1:1-3); the twelve zodiacal signs (which are actually depicted in artistic representations of the zodiac in other synagogues); the names of the twelve Hebrew months; the three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the three companions of Daniel: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. These Hebrew literary inscriptions have interesting analogues with contemporary synagogue poetry, Hebrew Piyyut. The names of the zodiacal signs and of the Hebrew months, for example, serve as motif-words in the liturgical poems of the greatest of the classical *paytanim*. Thus, in the famous *shiv'ata'* (a set of *piyyuṭim* based on the sabbath or holiday Amidah prayer of seven blessings) of Rabbi Eleazar Hakalliri for the spring-summer season (“*ṭal*”) entitled *'lym bywm mḥsn*, each strophe of an acrostic stanza ends alternatively with the name of a month or a zodiacal sign. Thus, *alef* corresponds to the month Nisan, *bet* to the sign Aries, *gimmel* to Iyyar, *dalet* to Taurus, *he* to Sivan and so

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18. See B. Lifshitz, “The Ancient Synagogue of Hamat-Tiberias, its Floor and Inscriptions”, *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel* (Haifa 1974), pp. 103 ff. (Hebrew); *idem*, “L'ancienne synagogue de Tibériade, sa mosaïque et ses inscriptions”, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 4 (1973), pp. 49-53. On Greek inscriptions which relate to the works of community leaders, see *idem*, *Donateurs et fondateurs* (above, p. 48), p. 47, 73.

19. *Pirqe Lashon* (Jerusalem 1971), p. 102 (Hebrew).

20. See M. Schwabe, “A Jewish Inscription from Eḏ-Ḍumêr Near Damascus”, *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research*, XX (1951), p. 268.

21. See Tiberias (N 24) and Khirbet Susiya (N 76). See also LXX to the end of Nehemiah 13:31.



on. One letter corresponds to two months (*qof*, Tevet and Shevat) and one letter to two zodiacal signs (*resh*, Capricorn and Aquarius). It is most interesting that these two signs which are paired in synagogal poetry are also linked in synagogue mosaics.<sup>22</sup> The link between synagogal poetry and the zodiac is apparently quite early. The anonymous author of the ancient eulogy entitled 'z *bhṭ'ynw ḥrv mqdš*<sup>23</sup> describes the mourning on earth by depicting the particular lament of each of the zodiacal figures:

Aries first cried with soulful bitterness / For his lambs were led to slaughter...  
Cancer was about to fall to earth / For we have fainted from thirst  
The heavens were startled by the voice of Leo / For our roar has not risen to heaven  
Virgins and also youths were killed / And thus the face of Virgo darkened<sup>24</sup>

Another type of literary inscription, the list of the priestly courses, appears in three places in Palestine: Caesarea (N 51), Ashkelon (N 52) and Kisufim (N 56). It turns out that Jews took this custom of decorating the synagogue with the list of priestly courses even to far-away Yemen, for remnants of such a list have been found on a stone column at Bait al-Hādir, east of Sanaa (N 106). These lists contain not only the names of the heads of the priestly families according to number, who served in the Temple, but also the place in which each family settled in the Galilee after the Destruction. The list concluded: "All the priestly courses are twenty-four".<sup>25</sup> Samuel Klein's reconstruction on the basis of literary sources of what he called the *baraita* of the twenty-four courses has been confirmed by the synagogue inscriptions. Klein's primary sources were various *piyyuṭim* to the Ninth of Av into which the liturgical poets of Byzantine Palestine wove the names of the courses and their homes.<sup>26</sup> An early *payṭan*, who signs his name in his poems with the acrostic *HDWTH*, even wrote twenty-four sets of *piyyuṭim* about the courses for the sabbaths.<sup>27</sup> It appears, therefore, that the list of priestly courses had a special meaning for the synagogue goers of this period which found expression both in the inscriptions of the synagogue and in the liturgical poetry which was read within its walls.

Another list is found in the literary inscription at Rehov (N 49) near Beth-Shean which contains a detailed list of about thirty types of fruits and vegetables for-

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22. See the informative study of A. Mirsky, "Aquarius and Capricornus in the En-Gedi Pavement Inscription", *Tarbiz* 40 (1971), pp. 376 ff. (Hebrew).

23. See *Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Davidson (New York 1924-1933), *alef* 2104.

24. *Seder Haqinot Letish'ah Be'av*, ed. D. Goldschmidt (Jerusalem 1968), p. 30.

25. See E. Fleischer, "A Piyyut of Yannai Ḥazzan on the Priestly Courses" *Sinai* 64 (1969), pp. 182-183 (Hebrew); *idem*, "New Developments on the Topic of the Courses in Piyyuṭim", *Dov Sadan Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem 1977), pp. 283-284 (Hebrew).

26. *Sefer Hayishuv* Vol. I (Jerusalem 1939), pp. 162-163; *idem*, *Eretz Hagaliṭ*<sup>2</sup> (Jerusalem 1967), pp. 62 ff., 177 ff.

27. See P. Kahle, *Masoreten des Westens*, Vol. I (Stuttgart 1927), Hebrew Section. See also M. Zulay, "Contributions to the History of Liturgical Poetry in Palestine", *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry* V (1939), pp. 111 ff. (Hebrew).

bidden during the sabbatical year and requiring the giving of tithes in non-sabbatical years in Beth-Shean and other places. There is also a list of about ninety villages which are permitted or forbidden in regard to the sabbatical year and the giving of tithes. The names of these places, the geographic references, and the names of the fruits and vegetables are given in Aramaic and Greek; however, all the connective expressions, the comments and additions to the lists are in Hebrew and, as Y. Sussmann has pointed out, the language of the inscription is primarily Hebrew.<sup>28</sup> The characteristic features of the literary inscription – its list-like nature and its language – also appear, therefore, in the Rehov inscription. And it is interesting to note that this inscription as well has analogues with contemporary synagogal poetry. For we find in a *piyyuṭ* by Rabbi Eleazar Hakalliri for the spring-summer season (“*ṭal*”),<sup>29</sup> that each stanza ends with a list of groups of fruits upon which the *payṭan* requests a blessing. Thus, the fifth stanza concludes: “And bless and make bountiful sesame seeds and mustard greens and cumin and fennel”. This is remarkably similar to a group in the list of forbidden fruits in Beth-Shean: “the fennel and the sesame seeds and the mustard greens and the rice and the cumin” (third line of the inscription). One may ask, therefore, whether the primary function of the mosaic inscription laid in the floor of the synagogue at Rehov is the teaching of what is forbidden and what is permitted.<sup>30</sup> In any event, it seems that the community leaders chose to decorate the holy place and to set in its mosaic this particular text out of a sense of attachment to the area and its particular customs. For the same reason, a Palestinian *payṭan* could make use of the words of the text as motiv-words in his *piyyuṭim*.

As we have seen in this brief survey, study of the synagogue inscriptions of Palestine can help to illuminate the society and culture of Palestinian Jewry in an obscure but vital period. These inscriptions can be usually classified into four distinct groups on stylistic grounds, each group being marked by certain linguistic and formulaic characteristics. This classification can be of additional help in using the inscriptions to clarify questions of more general significance, such as the cultural position of the various languages spoken and written in Palestine and the social status and activity of various functionaries in synagogue life. Finally, since the inscriptions, unlike transmitted texts, bear a direct testimony of linguistic phenomena of the age in which they were set down, they are of particular value in clarifying philological questions and, as we have seen, may occasionally shed light on contemporaneous literary works, such as synagogal poetry.

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28. “A Halakhic Inscription from the Beth-Shean Valley – a Preliminary Survey”, *Tarbiṣ* 43 (1973-1974), pp. 146-147 (Hebrew). See also Z. Safrai, “The Rehov Inscription” *Immanuel* 8 (Spring 1978), pp. 48-57.

29. See M. Zulay in *Haaretz* of January 4, 1942 and in *Mivḥar Hashiv'im* (Jerusalem 1948), pp. 30-31 (Hebrew). Compare another *piyyuṭ* of similar composition, M. Zulay in *Haaretz* of April 20, 1951. Compare Y. Sussmann's additions and corrections to his above mentioned article in *Tarbiṣ* 44 (1974-1975), pp. 194. Thus, it appears that there are literary influences on the lists and on the organization of their contents into groups.

30. Compare Sussmann (above, n. 28), pp. 94-95.