

THE SYNAGOGUES SOUTH OF MT. JUDAH

by

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During recent years information has come to hand of several synagogues to the south of Mt. Judah. The first known was the synagogue at Masada which was an auxiliary building within the wall surrounding Masada, built during the war of destruction (60-70 C. E.). Next came the synagogue in the citadel of Herodium and that too was an auxiliary building inside the citadel. Then came detailed information of the synagogue at Samoa, which is the biblical and Talmudic *Eshtemoa*, and of the synagogue at nearby Khirbet Susia. To these few observations and reflections, I wish to add the synagogue at En-Gedi, since it too is situated in the region of Judah though not on the mountain but in the valley on the western shore of the Dead Sea. En-Gedi was located at the eastern extremity of the "southern" region and as such belonged to the Beth Guvrin (Eleutheropolis) area. No final account has yet been given concerning these synagogues, but in our discussion which will be mainly historical it is already possible from a consideration of all hitherto written about these discoveries to make several inferences.¹

The discovery of the remains of an ancient synagogue occurs in many instances through pure chance, as a result of digging an area for some other purpose, or the fortuitous baring of the upper area of the ground. One could say generally, however, that a chart of ancient synagogues is superimposed upon a map of those Jewish settlements known to us from Jewish and non-Jewish literary sources. A chart of the synagogues in Galilee, especially those in Lower Galilee, corresponds to all that is known of the history of Jewish settlement in Galilee during the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud (from the 2nd to 5th/6th centuries). The same applies to the synagogues of the Golan. A substantial number of these synagogues are sited in places whose identity has not been clarified. In general, however, the remains of synagogues found corresponds to what is known from literary sources about the extent of Jewish settlement in the Golan during the third

¹ The first information about these synagogues and the first general publication concerning the inscriptions appeared in *Antiquities* 5 (1972) 13-54.

and fourth centuries,² perchance even from the years following the Bar Kokhba revolt.³

This description is also valid for the southern part of Mt. Judah. Jewish settlement was forced out of the central region of Mt. Judah following the destruction of the Temple, in particular after the Bar Kokhba revolt. In the southern sector, however, Jewish settlement continued in many localities. A Christian chronicle of the second half of the fourth century says, "God's anger was against the cities of the hypocrites, Jews and Samaritans, and against the erroneous beliefs in the south ... and the wrath of God began to go forth ... and it began by destroying 21 cities".⁴ Eusebius in the *Onomastikon* testifies "about several villages containing Jews", or "large villages of Jews", and even "very large villages", sited in the south. These include Bethenim (*Einam*),⁵ Asthemoe (*Eshtemoa*),⁶ Eingedi (*Ein Gedi*),⁷ Jetan (*Yuta*),⁸ Chemela (*Carmel*),⁹ Anea (*Anyah*),¹⁰ Eremmon (*Ein Ha-Rimon*),¹¹ Thela (*Talah*).¹² Various details can be added from Talmudic sources concerning Jewish settlements in this stretch of land,¹³ The discovery of synagogue remnants in such places as Eshtemoa, Ein Gedi, Hebron, Kefar Aziz, combines to complete this general description. There is, however, a marked difference between the appearance of Jewish settlement in Galilee and that in the southern sector of Mt. Judah. Whereas in Galilee the rural settlements were mainly Jewish and in many regions purely Jewish, the settlement in southern Mt. Judah, during the third and fourth centuries – the era of the synagogues – was a mixed one. Alongside the Jewish villages were mixed villages, and pagan and Christian villages. Thus it was stated that the village of Jethira (*Yatir*) was a Christian village in the fourth century.¹⁴ There were two villages called Anea, the larger one was inhabited by Jews and the smaller by Christians.¹⁵

The synagogue remains found in the southern region of settlement can teach us about the pattern of the Jewish settlement in that region and throw light upon the meaning of many ancient traditions.

² See JT, *Shevi'it* 6, top of p. 36 d; also JT, *Avodah Zarah* 2, top of p. 41 c, and JT, *Ma'aserot* end of ch. 4.

³ See S. Klein, *Ever ha-Yarden ha-Mizrachi* (1925) p. 212 ff.

⁴ Philostorgius, *Anh*, VIII 38a (G. C. S. 21 p. 237).

⁵ *On.* ed. of E. Klostermann, p. 94.

⁶ *Ibid.* 26, 11.

⁷ *Ibid.* 26, 11; 88, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.* 108, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.* 92, 19-21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 26, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 88, 17.

¹² *Ibid.* 98, 26.

¹³ See particularly JT, *Nedarim* ch. 7, end of 40a.

¹⁴ *On.* 108, 1-4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 26, 9-10; 26, 13-14.

An ancient tradition customary during all the generations of the Second Temple era and the years following provides that during prayer one must turn towards Jerusalem and towards the Temple: "Those standing in prayer outside the land of Israel turn their faces towards the land of Israel ... in the land of Israel they turn their faces towards Jerusalem".¹⁶ The view that one must turn towards Jerusalem in prayer is already found in late biblical sources,¹⁷ and was also traditional among Christian-Jewish sects.¹⁸ In the ancient synagogues of Galilee much energy was expended to adapt the construction of the building to meet the demand that the worshippers should turn towards Jerusalem, until finally in later synagogues it became standard to place the wall where the holy ark stood in the direction of Jerusalem. Thus in the synagogues built later in Galilee the main wall is in the south, facing towards Jerusalem. This wall and the structure alongside were built so that the holy ark could be placed there, and in conformity therewith the mosaic designs found in the later synagogues were also pointed in that direction. In the synagogues of Mt. Judah the niche for the holy ark was placed in the northern wall, directed towards Jerusalem, as is customary in later synagogues. This was the reverse of the Galilee synagogue because south Judah is in the opposite direction from Jerusalem. There was, however, something peculiar in which their construction differed from the synagogues of Galilee. In the Tosefta of *Megillah* (4:22) it states: "The entry to a synagogue must be made on the eastern side alone, since the Temple porch was open towards the east". Researchers have tried hard in our days¹⁹ to explain this halakhah. For the synagogues of Galilee, known during the past decades, have no entry on the eastern side. In the most ancient synagogues the entry is on the southern side, the side directed to Jerusalem, while in later synagogues the entry is opposite the wall directed to Jerusalem, i. e. on the northern side. In the synagogues of Mt. Judah, however, the entrance is indeed found on the eastern side. The same is the case in the single synagogue whose meagre remains have been discovered in Jerusalem. The same applies to Masada and Herodium, as well as to the synagogues of Eshtemoa and Khirbet Susia. In Masada and Herodium they were forced to place the entry on the eastern side in the arrangement of buildings inserted there, whereas in the synagogue in Jerusalem, and especially in the synagogue of Eshtemoa and Khirbet Susia, the entrance was

¹⁶ JT, *Berakhot* 4, 8b-c, and parallels; cf. M Ber. 4:5.

¹⁷ I Kings 8:44 (and the parallel in II Chronicles 6:38); Daniel 6:11.

¹⁸ Iranaeus, *Adversus Haer.* I 26; Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 8, col. 687. See also S. Pines, "The Jewish Christians of Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source", in the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, Proceedings 2, 13 (1966) 11.

¹⁹ See L. Ginzberg, A Commentary on the Palestinian Talmud III, p. 381ff; L. Liebermann, *Tosefta ki-Fshuta* V, 1200.

planned and executed initially on the eastern side. Only the synagogue in Ein Gedi has not its entrance on the eastern side. It must not be forgotten, however, that that synagogue is of a later date (end of the fifth to the beginning of the sixth century). I am dealing with this problem of the entrances on the east, because of the great importance that has been attributed to this problem. A certain scholar at the beginning of the century explained that this halakhah was intended to negate the view of those heretics who worshipped towards the east.²⁰ He adduced proof from the words of a third century blind Amora, who ordered his servant to stand him facing any direction save the east because the heretics give thanks to it.²¹ It is indeed known that Christians were accustomed to pray towards the east.²² This halakhah that the entrance should be towards the east alone, thus teaching that this was not the direction to which they turned in prayer, reflects the traditional halakhah of Judah and was not accepted in Galilee. It would appear that during the course of the years it was also forgotten in Judah, as appears from the En Gedi synagogue which belongs to a later date.

Another phenomenon peculiar to the synagogues of Mt. Judah is the uncommonness of Greek in the inscriptions inside the synagogue. In Galilee, Greek inscriptions are found alongside the Hebrew and the Aramaic, but in the synagogues dealt with here all the inscriptions are in Aramaic and Hebrew. The same is true of the synagogues in Jericho²³ and in Na'aran,²⁴ while the remnant of the Beth Guvrin synagogue possesses an Aramaic inscription.²⁵ In the synagogues of the Judean Shefelah, such as Hulda²⁷ and Ashkelon,²⁸ also Greek is found. Greek did not penetrate into the synagogues of Mt. Judah because they were at a distance from Greek cities. The number of inscriptions is exceptionally high, a fact both evident and explicable. In Na'aran there are nine inscriptions, in Jericho two, in the synagogue at En Gedi four inscriptions were discovered on the western side during the first dig, and a fifth inscription during the season of the second dig. All are in Aramaic or Hebrew.²⁹ In Khirbet Susia four inscriptions were discovered, two short ones in Aramaic and two rather longer in Hebrew. In Eshtemoa only one inscription has been found and it is in Aram-

²⁰ J. Schor, *Sefer Ha-Itim* (1902) 273 n 121.

²¹ *Bava Batra* 25a.

²² E. Peterson, *Früh-Kirche Judentum und Gnosis* (1959), 4ff. and 15ff; Lieberman, *ibid.* has already drawn attention to this.

²³ Barsamki, *Q. D. A. P.* 6 (1938) 23-27.

²⁴ Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum* II, 1197-1207.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 1196.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 1195.

²⁷ Avi-Yonah, *Rabinowitz Bulletin* 3 (1960) 57-60.

²⁸ Frey. *Ibid.* 964.

²⁹ The first inscriptions have been discussed by several scholars in *Tarbiz* (1971)

aic. A further phenomenon should be noted though it is doubtful if the limited number of inscriptions warrants conclusions. Talmudic sources stress that Hebrew was better preserved in Judah than in Galilee and that they were more particular in that region about Hebrew pronunciation.³⁰ One scholar of Beth Guvrin, R. Jonathan (3rd century) is the author of the statement: The world possesses four beautiful languages; Greek for song, Latin for war, Syriac for mourning, Hebrew for speech.³¹ Two lengthy inscriptions written in beautiful Hebrew have been preserved in Khirbet Susia, besides two short Hebrew inscriptions, not yet published. The customary formula indicating the donation of an individual is, as usual, in Aramaic: "Let be remembered for a blessing ..." or: "Be remembered for a blessing ...", in the plural. In Khirbet Susia, however, the Hebrew formulation occurs: "Be remembered for good and a blessing" (*zekhurim le-tovah we-livrahkah*). A short Hebrew inscription is found also in Jericho, and the conclusion of an inscription in En-Gedi is also in Hebrew. Whether it is permissible to infer from the Hebrew inscriptions, which are supported by literary evidence, that Hebrew was preserved in this region of Judah remains an open question. It would appear to be more appropriate to indicate this fact and to withhold judgment until further discoveries are made. The paucity of inscriptions does not afford conclusive proof.

The lengthiest inscription of Khirbet Susia reads as follows:

זכור לטובה קדושת מרי רבי
איסי הכהן המכובד בירבי שעשה
הפס' פוס הזה וטח את כותליו
בסיד מה שנתנדב במשתה
רבי יוחנן הכהן הסופר בירבי
בנו שלום על ישראל אמן.

"May be remembered for good the saintly master teacher
Isi the priest the honoured eminent scholar made
This mosaic and covered its walls
With plaster as he vowed at the feast of
Rabbi Yochanan the eminent priestly scribe
His son. Peace upon Israel. Amen.

The inscription is absolutely clear, lacking not a single letter, and there is no doubt at all about how it should be read. The archaeologists who published the inscription state that, "the use of the attribute *kedushat*

³⁰ *Eruvin* 53a-b; *JT Berakhot* 2, 4d; *B. Megillah* 24b. The quotations from the *Ketubbah* (marriage settlement) written according to the custom of Galilee are in Aramaic, whereas those from the *Ketubbah* written in Judah are in Hebrew in accord with the custom there. See *Ketubbot* 4:12.

³¹ *JT, Megillah* 1, 72b, and *Sotah* 7, 21c.

(saintly) as part of a person's name is unknown from the Talmudic era, and does not occur in the sources. On the other hand this title does occur at the beginning of letters, commencing with the Geonic era" (between the 9th and 10th centuries). With all respect, the scholars are only right as regards their final words, that this title was common in the Geonic era, but not that it is not known in the Talmudic era. The Jerusalem Talmud in two places³² relates the deeds of Chananiah, son of Rabbi Joshua's brother who was sent or travelled to Babylon in the days preceding the Bar Kokhba revolt, and who subsequently, seemingly during the post Bar Kokhba era, sought to determine the new months and to intercalate the years independently of, and without reference to, Eretz Israel. The scholars of Israel assayed at first to try and persuade Chananiah to desist of his own free will from this attempt. Their first letter was addressed to him in conciliatory and respectful words: *le-kedushat Chananiah* (to the saintly Chananiah). This formulation intended to show especial respect does not perhaps date from the Talmudic era, the period to which it refers, but it dates at least from the era of the Amoraim.

I should like to put forward a suggestion as to the identity of Isi the priest mentioned in the inscription. The stressing of the titles shows that it is referring to a well-known personality in his time. We indeed know of a scholar Isi **איסי**³³, **יסא**³⁴), one of the heads of the Sanhedrin in Tiberias between the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth centuries. One of the greatest Amoraim mentioned in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds was R. Isi who was a priest³⁵ and who was seemingly possessed of great wealth.³⁶ The Jerusalem Talmud relates of R. Isi: **רבי יסא רבי ימעו אזל לגבי חסא דאישתמעו**³⁷ "R. Isi went to Chasa of Eshtemoa" etc., i. e. a scholar who was one of the heads of the Sanhedrin of Tiberias journeyed to Eshtemoa, it being usual for scholars to travel a great deal.³⁸ If the suggestion is correct then one could suppose that when R. Isi visited Eshtemoa he also visited the neighbouring Khirbet Susia because his son was about to marry there, or more probably one should explain the sentence (*bemishteh Rabbi Yochanan ha-Cohen ... beno*) as meaning that the son of R. Yochanan was about to marry, his father R. Isi visited him for the feast, and on this appropriate occasion contributed the mosaic and the plastering of the

³² JT, *Nedarim* 6, 40a, and *Sanhedrin* 1, 19a.

³³ JT, *Nedarim* 3, 37d et al.

³⁴ JT, *Shekalim* 7, 20c et al.

³⁵ *Giitn* 59b et al.

³⁶ *Kiddushin* 31b; for his philanthropy see Tanhuma, *Mishpatim* 2.

³⁷ JT, *Nedarim* 6, end of 40b. The copy is taken from the text cited from the Geonic literature in, J. Mann, *Texts and Studies II* (1972) 618.

³⁸ Many traditions are extant about R. Isi's journeys. See JT, *Hagigah* 1, 76c, of his journey with two colleagues to the cities of Israel.

walls. One must however be wary about coming to this conclusion. One of the outstanding scholars of the next generation was also called Rabbi Jose or Rav Yisa. His name appears frequently with his colleague Rabbi Jonah, and it is not always possible to distinguish the first Rabbi Jose from the second. This cannot be determined from the passage in the Jerusalem Talmud, since it is doubtful whether Chasa or Eshtemoa³⁹ is not mentioned again in the literature, so that his date cannot be determined. Since, however, it is not known whether R. Jose, the colleague of R. Jonah, was a priest, it is more reasonable to identify the R. Isi the priest of the inscription with the first R. Isi who was a priest.

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³⁹ The Babylonian Talmud refers to a scholar R. Chasa who transmits in the name of R. Ammi, a colleague of the first R. Isi (B. M. 57a) and of R. Jeremiah (following MS Hamburg) who was also of that generation. The same scholar is apparently mentioned in *Niddah* 23b where Rava, who was of a much later generation, transmits in his name. It would seem very doubtful whether this Chasa is identical with the Chasa of Eshtemoa. For it is quite possible that the former Chasa was a Babylonian scholar, since all these Amoraim lived first in Babylonia, while Rava spent his whole life there. It is possible therefore that these are two different scholars: Chasa of Eshtemoa, and the Babylonian Chasa who lived in the same generation. It could very well be however that they are identical. For Rava also transmits in the name of other scholars of Eretz Israel.