

THE GIV'AT ha-MIVTAR ARAMAIC TOMB INSCRIPTION IN PALEO-HEBREW SCRIPT AND ITS HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

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1. *Discovery and Publication*

1.1 During the course of construction work which was carried out at Giv'at ha-Mivtar in northeast Jerusalem in 1971, a burial cave was accidentally discovered. The cave was rock-hewn and contained most of the elements found in Jewish tombs of this period (middle of the 1st cent. B.C.E. — end of the 1st cent. C.E.) which surround Jerusalem along the north, east, and west (Tzaferis 1974:63). The cave is composed of two chambers (Rooms I and II), and in the southwest corner of Room I a burial niche was carved under a stone shelf. In this niche a beautifully carved ossuary was found (Ib.: pl. XIX:3) which contained human skeletal remains (see below §§ 4.4-5). In the eastern wall of Room I there is a small opening which leads into Room II. A burial niche carved in the middle of the southern wall of Room II was found empty, but above it there was a monumental inscription incised in paleo-Hebrew letters and in the Aramaic language. Since no other material remains were found in the cave, it was concluded that at some later date it was employed secondarily during which time such objects which may have been placed there were removed (Tzaferis 1974: 61-64).

1.2 The inscription is incised within a frame measuring ca. 80 × 65 cm. which is divided into seven strips, the second and fifth of which are painted in red. The inscription was originally published in a preliminary form with a Hebrew translation by E.S. Rosenthal (1972) who published it shortly afterward with an English translation in an article which dealt with its philological and historical aspects (Rosenthal

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1973). At the same time, J. Naveh (1973a) published the inscription in an article which dealt primarily with its epigraphic aspects.¹ In the following year, Rosenthal (1974) published a much more detailed Hebrew version of his English article.

1.3 The inscription was subsequently removed from the cave, which was then sealed, and it now is on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

2. Text, Translation, and Linguistic Commentary

2.1 Though the inscription is written in *scriptio continua* and words are occasionally divided between two lines, the division of the text into individual words presents no difficulty. The text itself is practically undamaged, and except for one letter its reading presents no problems.

2.2 The following is the text and translation:

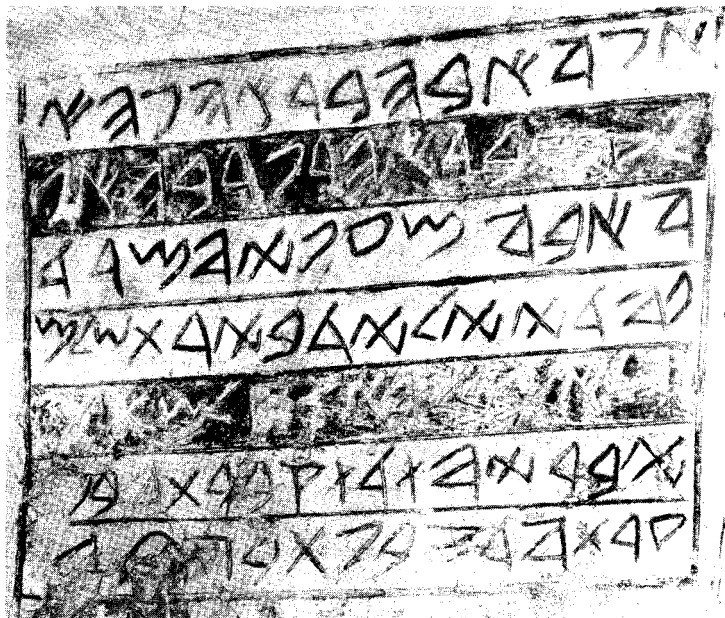
1. I, Abba b. Cahana, < b. >	אנה אבה בר כהנה א
2. Elazar (or: b. Elazar the priest) b. Aharon, (my) distant ancestor,	לעזר < בר אהרן רבה אנ
3. I, Abba, the afflicted (and) the persecuted one, who was born in Jerusalem	ה אבה מעניה מרד פה די יליד בירושלם
4. and went into exile in Babylonia and brought up Mattathai	וגלא ולבבל ואסק למתת
5. b. Yehud, and I buried him in the	י בר יהוד וקברתה במ
6. cave which I purchased by writ	ערתה דזבנת בגטה

2.3 Linguistic commentary²

Line 1 אנה אבה – As in a number of northwest Semitic inscriptions (Poebel 1932)³ the inscription begins with the first person pronoun. Thus, אנה begins a verbal clause and is not the subject of a nominal one (i.e., “I, Abba...” and not “I am Abba...”). After giving his genealogy, the author begins the main part of the text by repeating these two words (line 3), a literary device known, for example, from Phoenician.⁴ Since the author of the text was not the deceased, the inscription is formally of the building type and is not an epitaph (Rosenthal 1973: 73-74).

< אנה אבה > – All previous scholars who have dealt with the inscription have taken this to be the common noun “the priest.” However, the appositional place-

1. See also Naveh 1973b for a more popular Hebrew version of this article.
 2. In this section, I have tried to succinctly summarize the comments of the previous scholars who have dealt with the inscription, indicating which views seem preferable to me. The major novelty in this linguistic commentary lies in the comparison of our text with the other Aramaic epigraphic material from the late Second Temple period.
 3. This was pointed out by Z. Ben-Hayyim *apud* Rosenthal 1974: 340, fn. 19a.
 4. Cf. the Yehawmilk inscription (Poebel 1932: 12): אנה יהומלק מלך גבל בן יהורבעל בן בן ארמלק ... יקרא אנה את רבתי בעל גבל ...



By courtesy of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums.

The Giv'at ha-Mivtar Aramaic tomb inscription (in paleo-Hebrew script).



By courtesy of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums.

The southern wall of Room II of the Giv'at ha-Mivtar burial cave with the inscription and burial niche (right bottom).

ment of this title before the name אלעזר is syntactically difficult (Rosenthal 1973: 74). In fact, in other contemporary ossuary texts the expected order is always followed, e.g. פִּינַחַס וְיַעֲקִיבִיָּה כְּהֵנָה (Fitzmyer 1978: no 139:1); שְׁלִמְצִיּוֹן בֶּת שִׁמְעוֹן (Frey 1952: no. 1317). Lieberman's suggestion (1974: 377 and fn. 17) that this was done for emphasis is not convincing.⁵ Rather we seem to have here the proper name, Cahana, a name borne by several Palestinian Amoraim (see Rosenthal: 1974: 343-344, who discusses this possibility but rejects it). Following this explanation, אלעזר must be a previous ancestor. The difficulty, however, is that in this case the word בר is missing before the name (Ib.: 345). This may be explained in light of a very common usage found in Palmyrene inscriptions, although not otherwise attested to my knowledge in Jewish inscriptions. When a genealogy is given in these texts, the word בר may be employed or omitted at the discretion of the writer e.g. צִלְמָא דְנָה דִּי אֶצְטָלִי בֵּר חִירָן שְׁבָא בֵּר חִירָן בּוּנָא שְׁבַת “This statue is that of Astali, son of Ḥairān, (son of) Sabā, son of Ḥairān, (son of) Bōnnē, (son of) Shabbath” (Cooke 1903: no. 112: 1-2).⁶

אלעזר – The most likely explanation of this form is that it is an error (haplography) committed by the engraver due to the close similarity between *reš* and *bet* in the paleo-Hebrew script (Rosenthal 1973: 74, fn. 10): The *scriptio continua* was clearly a contributing factor here.

אהרן רבה – This seems to refer to Aharon, the high priest (Rosenthal 1973: 74; but cf. Lieberman 1974: 380). Rosenthal (ib.: 73) translates “Aharon the Great” and connects רבה with a special use of גדול “great” in the terminology of Sifre Zutta as referring specifically to the high priest (ib.: 75; 1974: 345-354). However, in light of known Aramaic usage, a different explanation seems more plausible, viz. רבה “the distant ancestor” (Teixidor 1974: 327). The earliest attestation of this usage known to this writer is in the Aramaic text of Enoch from Qumran (4QEn^e): אמך רבתא “your mother of old” (i.e. Eve) (Milik 1976: 235, line 10). This usage is also frequently found in Palmyrene inscriptions, most often – as in our text – at the end of genealogies (Ingholt 1966: 470-476, especially, 472, where many examples are quoted⁷). Furthermore, Dion (1975: 418-419) has pointed out in connection with our text that this same usage is also attested in the Greek text of Tobit (Ἀξαρίας Ἀνανίου τοῦ μεγάλου [5:13]; τοὺς (δύο) υἱοὺς Σεμεῖου τοῦ μεγάλου [ib. 14]) – where it is probably a calque from the Aramaic original – as well as elsewhere in Hellenistic Greek.

5. Note that the example in our text is an apposition, while the examples quoted by Lieberman are all with adjectival modifiers.

6. Cf. the texts ib.: 265-295, where numerous additional examples of this feature may be found.

7. E.g. קברא דנה די כיתות בר תימרצו בר כיתות בר תימחא רבא “This is the tomb of Kitōt, son of Taimaršū, son of Kitōt, son of Taimahā, the elder;” (CIS II/I: 4115); תימא בר חלפתא בר תימרצו בר “Taimā, son of Ḥalafatā, son of Taimarsū, son of Šim’on, who is called Qoqaḥ, the elder” (ib.: 4277).

Line 3 מעניה מרדפה – A. Kempinski (apud Naveh 1973: 91, fn. 47) has pointed out the similar Mandaic phrase found in colophons: אַנא אַניא וְדאַניא וּמְרַאדפּאַ: “I, poor, humble, and persecuted.”

מרדפה – The reading of the *pe* here is somewhat doubtful, and *nun* is a possible alternative (Rosenthal 1973: 75; Naveh 1973: 88). However, in view of the fact that the sense of מרדפה is preferable to מרדנה and the juxtaposition of this word with מעניה (see previous note), this reading should be preferred (Rosenthal *ib.*).

Line 4 די – This is the older form of the relative pronoun. But note that the later form דִּי occurs in our text in line 7 (דִּיבֹנְתָא) (Rosenthal 1974: 369). In the other contemporary epigraphic texts from the Jerusalem area, only די is employed (Fitzmyer 1978: nos. 69:1, 88:2, 89:1). The vacillation in our inscription – as in the Genesis Apocryphon (Kutscher 1958: 6) – reflects the influence of Middle Aramaic on the writer of the text.

יליד – As first observed by E.Y. Kutscher (apud Rosenthal 1973:76), this is a *qal* passive perfect. While this form disappeared in Middle Aramaic, it was still used in Standard Literary Aramaic (Sokoloff 1979: 204). Another contemporary example of this grammatical form occurs in the Kidron Valley dipinto (Fitzmyer 1978: no. 67:1-2): כּוּכַה דְּנַה עֵבִיד לְגַרְמֵי אֲבָהֵתְנָה: “This burial chamber was made for the bones of our fathers.”

ואסק – Note that while the *af’el* is used here, in the contemporary Uzziah plaque (Fitzmyer 1978: no. 70), we find הִתִּית (line 1). Nothing can be learnt from this form concerning the date of the text (Rosenthal 1973: 77). Since this line relates to the action which Abba himself took, we are tempted to see here possibly a mistake for וַאֲסַקְתָּ (cf. lines 6, 7).

למתתי – This is apparently a shortened form of מִתְתִּיחָה⁸; cf. the name מִתְתָּא in a legal document from Naḥal Ḥever (Fitzmyer 1978: no. 51, line 17). Note, however, the alternate explanation given by Rosenthal (1973: 77-78).

For the use here of ל – to indicate the direct object, see Rosenthal 1974: 364.

יהוד – Apparently “Judah.” For a discussion of this form instead of the expected יהודה, see Rosenthal 1973: 78.

Line 6 וקברתה – With this line the inscription reverts to the first person (Rosenthal 1973: 74, fn. 9).⁹ In my opinion, this usage clears up an old problem in the Uzziah Plaque inscription (Fitzmyer 1978: no. 70) which similarly relates of a secondary burial by another party: לְכַה הִתִּית טַמֵּי עֹזִיָּה. The previous explanation which

8. Cf. at Elephantine the form עֵנִי for עֲנִיָּה (Grelot 1972: 466).

9. But see above, note to line 4.

regarded this as a 3 f.sg. hof'al form agreeing with a pl. noun (so e.g. E.Y. Kutscher in Rosenthal 1967: 52, fn. 6) is unparalleled and is hardly acceptable. Translate simply: "Here *I brought* the bones of Uzziah."

For another possible example of a declaration – this time in the third person – by the one who took care of the secondary burial, cf. the ossuary inscription ירוסף בר יהוסף: אבא קבר בריה: "Joseph b. Anin, the poor man; the father buried his son" (Fitzmyer 1978: no. 145).¹⁰

Line 7 בנטה – As pointed out by Greenfield (1974: 83) and Rosenthal (1973: 373 and 156), the fact that the burial cave was purchased with a document is paralleled by similar usages in Nabatean burial inscriptions.

בנטה – This is now the earliest attestation of this Akkadian loanword in Aramaic whose original meaning is "parchment document."¹¹

3. *Script, Orthography, and Language*

3.1 The Abba Inscription is unique among the late Second Temple period inscriptions from Jerusalem in that it is written in paleo-Hebrew characters but in the Aramaic language. As has been demonstrated (Naveh 1970: 277-278), in ancient times script and language went together. In fact, the linguistic affiliation of short texts such as seals rests strongly on paleographic criteria.

3.2 During the Second Temple period the Jews gradually relinquished their national script in favour of the Aramaic script, a historical fact still recalled in Tannaitic times (Tos. Sanhedrin 4:7). Since Jews now used both Hebrew and Aramaic as literary idioms, the direct relationship between script and language was lost. The paleo-Hebrew script was only used for nationalistic reasons (e.g. on coins from the Maccabean period and from the First and Second Revolts) or by sectarian or conservative elements in the population for writing certain biblical texts (e.g. the Penta-teuch at Qumran).

3.3 Paleographically, the cursive script of the Abba Inscription provides the missing link between the paleo-Hebrew script of the Hasmonean period and the later Samaritan script (Naveh 1973: 88). On this basis, the inscription should be dated from the end of the 1st cent. B.C.E. or in the 1st cent. C.E. (Naveh *ib.*). This paleographical dating agrees with the conclusions reached on the basis of the archeological evidence (Tzaferis 1977: 63).

3.4 Orthographically, the inscription is characterised by the consistent use of *he* to indicate the determination (eight examples, no exceptions) as well as in the personal

10. This is Fitzmyer's translation. The text presents difficulties which cannot be dealt with here.

11. For the latest treatment of this word, see Kaufman 1974: 52-53.

pronoun אנה (2X) (The only example of the use of *alef* is in the 3 m.sg. perfect form אנה (line 5), a III-y verb). In this feature, the orthographic practice of our text conforms with the late Second Temple period usage as exemplified by previously known ossuary inscriptions.¹² The consistent use of *he* is well known later from Eretz Israel in Galilean and Samaritan Aramaic and has now turned up as early as the mid second cent. B.C.E. in a manuscript of Enoch (4QEn^a; see Sokoloff 1979: 202). On the other hand, the orthographical practice of late Standard Literary Aramaic as exemplified by the Genesis Apocryphon overwhelmingly employs *alef* for the determination as well as in other grammatical categories ending in [-ā] (Kutscher 1958: 26-27). The only epigraphic text from the late Second Temple period which follows this practice is the Jason Tomb Inscription (Fitzmyer 1978: no. 89), dated to the 1st cent. B.C.E. (ib.: 229, with bibliography).

3.5 Linguistically, there are no salient features in the text which can enable us to narrow down the period of the composition of the text. Af'el forms are already found in Official Aramaic, while the passive qal is found in the Kidron Valley dipinto (see above, § 2.3, on line 7) dating definitely to the late Second Temple period. On the basis of the textual language, it could certainly date from the end of the 1st cent. B.C.E. to the middle of the 1st cent. C.E. as the archeological and paleographical evidence have indicated.

3.6 While the text conforms linguistically to what was previously known of the Aramaic of the period, paleographically it is unique for its time. In any event, neither of these criteria weigh decisively in favour of a Samaritan origin for the text (see below, § 4.2).

4. Historical Interpretation

4.1 In both his articles on the Abba Inscription, Rosenthal (1973: 30-31; 1974: 372-373) deals cautiously with the central problem of the inscription, whether the text is of Jewish or Samaritan origin. On the one hand, certain indicators (e.g. the script and the reference to "Aharon the Great") have been taken to point to a Samaritan origin, while others (e.g. the fact that Abba was born in Jerusalem and that the cave is in Jerusalem) point to a Jewish origin.

4.2 S. Lieberman (1974: 375-380) has strongly advocated a Samaritan origin for the text. His interpretation may best be stated by giving a translation of his conclusions in full (ib.: 379):

"In the final analysis, the inscription describes the tragedy of a Samaritan priest who converted to Judaism, (It is more probable that his father converted, since he already was born in Jerusalem.) who was persecuted in Jerusalem since he claimed to be a descendant of the high priests. He went into exile to a Jewish place among Jews, but re-

12. Cf. בלומה (Fitzmyer 1978: no. 66:1); כוכה (67:1); חלחה (69:1); הכלה (85a:1; b:2); קרה (86:2); כהנה (139:1); עניה (145:2).

mained faithful to the end, to Jerusalem where he purchased a burial site. Of course, one cannot come to a definite conclusion, but there are signs pointing to this quite plausible hypothesis.”

4.3 Y.M. Grntz (1974; 1975) has strongly argued for the Jewish origin of the text and has even proposed to identify Mattathai b. Yehuda with a previously known historical personage, viz. Antigonus, son of Aristobulos “the last of the Hasmoneans.”¹³ The identification is based on the fact that among the Hasmoneans, the name מתתיהו is the Hebrew equivalent of Antigonus and יהודיה that of Aristobulos (Grntz 1974: 21-22). The historical background of the inscription may be summarized according to Grntz as follows:

Abba who was either an Hasmonean or a supporter of the Hasmonean dynasty went into exile into Babylonia as a young man with Hyrcanos in 40 B.C.E. In the same year, the Parthians captured Judea, and they appointed Antigonus son of Aristobulos as king. In order to prevent Hyrcanos from challenging him for the high priesthood, Antigonus had him maimed by having his ear cut off. However, in 37 B.C.E., Herod regained the kingship in Judea and Antigonus was brought to Antioch where he was executed by having his head chopped off by an axe. Afterwards, when Hyrcanos decided to return to Judea, Abba, who was born in Jerusalem, accompanied him to his hometown and brought back Antigonus' body to Jerusalem and interred it in the cave.¹⁴

4.4 In his second and expanded article published in 1975, Grntz dealt with the text in more detail and added further evidence for his theory from the anthropological evidence found in the cave. As noted above (§ 1.1), nothing was found in Room II where the inscription was carved, but in Room I an ossuary with human skeletal remains was discovered in a niche under the wall bench (Tzaferis 1977: 61; 64). After having made a preliminary examination of the bones in the ossuary, N. Hass concluded that they belonged to three people: Two men aged ca. 25 and 65 respectively, and a boy aged three (ib.: 64), and that the head of one of the individuals had been severed (Grntz 1975: 265; Smith 1977: 22) as indeed had been the fate of Antigonus-Mattathai §4.3).¹⁵

4.5 However, in her more detailed, final examination of the skeletal remains P.S. Smith (1977: 121-124) has come to a different conclusion. We may quote it here in full (ib.: 124):

“The identification of the remains of the individual with the cut mandible and odontoid process as female and elderly was confirmed by independent observations and by

13. This identification was independently suggested by M. Avi-Yonah (*apud* Rosenthal 1973:76, fn. 36), and D. Flusser (*apud* Naveh 1973:91, fn. 48). On this theory, see also Bendavid 1975.

14. Grntz' claims have been challenged by Lieberman in an addendum to his article (1974: 379-380) as well as by D. Flusser (orally, on an Israeli television program “The Last of the Hasmoneans” which was devoted to our inscription). In an addendum to his second article, Grntz (1975: 266-268) has replied to Lieberman's criticisms.

15. We may note here in passing that human skeletal remains have been found elsewhere on Giv'at ha-Mivtar. Especially important is the case of a crucified man (Haas 1970: 49-59).

another anthropologist. It may be concluded, therefore, that the remains in question are not those of Mattathiah. Although there is some uncertainty as to whether the blows caused death or were struck immediately after death, considerable force must have been used.”

Thus, Grintz' historical analysis is not confirmed by the anthropological evidence.

In conclusion, the Aramaic inscription from Giv'at ha-Mivtar in paleo-Hebrew script may be justly considered one of the most important epigraphic discoveries from the Second Temple period made in the Jerusalem area. Important both to student of Aramaic language and script, its background and the figure and origin of Abba still remain a tantalizing enigma for the historian.

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Immanuel 10 (Spring 1980)