

Aramaic Inscriptions in the Tomb of Jason

N. AVIGAD

Hebrew University, Jerusalem

DURING the clearing of the Tomb of Jason in Rehov Alfasi, Jerusalem, in 1965, by L. Y. Rahmani and M. Dothan, on behalf of the Israel Department of Antiquities, several Aramaic inscriptions, in a rather poor state, were found on the plastered walls of the porch of the tomb. The writer was asked to decipher these inscriptions, and was provided with photographs, facsimiles prepared shortly after the discovery and the results of M. Dothan's attempted readings of the larger inscription. This material aided the writer greatly during the deciphering, which was based mainly on an examination of the original inscription and on a new facsimile, published here. The main inscription has been clarified to a large extent, though parts of it still remains obscure; of the smaller inscriptions, the contents of only one is clear, the others being faint beyond recognition. Nevertheless a suggested reading of the inscriptions is given here so as to present them to the scholarly world in the hope that others will contribute to a fuller understanding of the contents.¹

I. A FUNERAL LAMENT

This inscription is written in charcoal on the northern plastered wall of the porch, to the left of the door opening. It contains four lines of uneven length, the first of which is 2.05 m, and the last 0.95 m long; the height of the letters (except the naturally long ones) is 3-9 cm; the first line is 2 m above the floor. The inscription is in Aramaic; the script is a flowing cursive, though without ligatures. Many letters have been lost through fading or peeling of the plaster, though most can still be discerned (Fig. 1; Pls. 25-26).

¹ I must thank Prof. Y. Kutscher for discussing with me the difficult linguistic problems of the text and for his constructive contributions on this matter.

קדונו קינא עלמא רחמיא למעבדא קד יז הוית שוא. שלם
 חני .. סגי מח ... קינא היכלין שלם

קדונו קינא עלמא רחמיא למעבדא קד יז הוית שוא. שלם
 חני .. סגי מח ... קינא היכלין שלם

קדונו קינא עלמא רחמיא למעבדא קד יז הוית שוא. שלם
 חני .. סגי מח ... קינא היכלין שלם

קדונו קינא עלמא רחמיא למעבדא קד יז הוית שוא. שלם
 חני .. סגי מח ... קינא היכלין שלם

1. קינא עלמא עיבד ליסוך בר פ... שלם די בנת לך קבור סבא הוה שלם אחי
2. 0
3. כדנין קינא עלמא רחמיא למעבדא קד יז הוית שוא. שלם
4. חני .. סגי מח ... קינא היכלין שלם

Fig. 1. The Jason inscription. Facsimile and transliteration.

Line 1. קינא עלמא—'a powerful lament'. This reading of the two partly indistinct words is based on their clearer repetition in line 3. The word קינא again appears in line 4, where it is clearer.

עִבְד—'make'—3rd. sing. masc. imperative of ܥܒܕ . Compare this *plene* spelling in Onkelos and the Jer. Targum on Gen. 6:4.

ליסן—'for Jason'—The *waw* is very small; the slight or no distinction between the *waw* and the *yod* is common in inscriptions of this period. The name Jason was common among hellenizing Jews as the equivalent for Joshua. Compare, among others, Jason the High Priest under Antiochus Epiphanes.² The name of Jason's father, beginning with a *pe*, is damaged and undecipherable. Above it, over the line, appears a small, three-letter word; it seems to us to read אחי 'my brother', and may possibly be a comment written by the scribe, desiring to set down his relation to the deceased.

שלם—This blessing reappears in this inscription at the end of each sentence.

די בנת לך קבור—These words are difficult to read and our interpretation is only conjectural.

The opening of direct speech with די has parallels among the Bar Kokhba Letters, where the body of a letter (after the usual salutary blessing) begins with the word די with the addition of a verb.³ The problematic words are the second and the last. The former could be read בית, though this does not conform with the context. The reading seemingly should be בנת, to be corrected to בניח, the *yod* having dropped out.

קבור—The third letter resembles a *yod*, though the possible passive form קביר is out of place here. It was observed above, that *waw* was also written quite small and thus it is here probably to be read as קבור, meaning 'a tomb'. This form appears in Syriac (with the article קבורא).

² At Assos on the coast of Asia Minor a Greek inscription from the second century B. C. was found, containing a statement of payment of money by a certain Nikitas, son of Jason, the Jerusalemite (J. B. Frey: *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*, II, Rome, 1952, No. 749). I must thank Mr. R. Cohen, who brought this inscription to my attention. It should also be noted that the name Jason occurs in a Greek inscription at Beth She'arim (Catacomb 13) of the third-fourth centuries A. D.

³ Y. Yadin: *IEJ* 11 (1961), p. 44, doc. 8; p. 45, doc. 10. See also Murabba'at 42: ... שידע יהי לך; and Murabba'at 72: ... זי שמע הוית. (P. Benoit, J. J. Milik, R. de Vaux: *Les Grottes de Murabba'at, Discoveries in the Judean Desert*, II, Oxford, 1961, pp. 156, 158, 173-174). Cf. also Daniel 2:25; 5:7; 6:6.

סבא—This, I believe, is the proper reading of the word. Meaning: 'elder'; compare the use of סבא in an ossuary inscription.⁴ As is well known, סבא was also used as an appellative for the Sages.

הוה שלם —The *shin* is written over the *he* of the preceding word. This was most likely caused by the scribe's having initially forgotten the *shin*, adding it later over the *he* for lack of space. The blessing הוה שלם ('be in peace') is very common in the Aramaic letters of Bar Kokhba found by Yadin in the Cave of Letters in the Judean Desert.

Line 2. This short line evidently consisted of only two or three words, completely missing except for a *samekh* at the end.

Line 3. כדנין —'such'—An unknown form; כדנן and כדין are known; possibly a combination of the two.

קינא עלמא—See above p. 103; all the letters are clear, except the faint *yod*. רחמיא —'the friends'.

למעבדא לך—The horizontal line of the *dalet* is damaged, but this letter is required by the context. Another possible word-division is למעבד אלך, preferable from the aspect of the structure of the first word, though the context of the second proves this difficult. The infinitive form למעבדא, instead of למעבד, is peculiar. Prof. Kutscher believes that this is a long infinitive as found in Biblical Aramaic,⁵ and that it has future meaning here, i. e., 'will make for thee'. It appears to him that the form could be a normal infinitive of the *eph'al*, following the form in Galilean Aramaic (i. e. *mem* before the root). The *eph'al* of עבד in the meaning of the *qal* is found in Syriac. In any case, the matter remains somewhat doubtful.

זי הוית —'who hast been'. זי together with די (line 1), is occasionally found in Aramaic inscriptions.⁶

שוא—The three letters are clear (possibly read *yod* for *waw*). There may be a final *nun* or a *he* following, according to the interpretation of the vertical line, whether or not it is a continuation of the downstroke of the *kaf* of the line above; however, neither gives an intelligible word. Most likely it is no letter

⁴ L. A. Mayer: A Tomb in the Kedron Valley, *Bull. Brit. School Archaeol., Jerusalem*, 5 (1924), p. 59, no. 1.

⁵ H. Bauer and P. Leander: *Grammatik des Biblisch-Aramäischen*, Halle, 1927, p. 301e.

⁶ Cf. J. Cantineau: *Le Nabatéen*, Paris, 1932, p. 2.

at all, but rather an accidental crossing of strokes. Contextually, a word meaning 'worth' is called for, though the matter is not clear.

Line 4. This line is partly damaged and, though most of the letters are readable, the contents is not sufficiently clear. It can only be said that, the only clear word being קינא, this line too deals with 'lament'.

The first word חני may be a personal name, a short form of חניה 'Honiah' which may have been the name of the scribe. After several faded letters, there is seemingly the word סגי 'great'. After this there are two clear letters; מו, followed by traces of one or two narrow letters.

After the clear קינא appear the letters היכילין. This word may, we believe, be interpreted as a combination of הי כילין or היך ילין where ילין is a short form of אילין, and should be translated 'like these'. Compare similar combinations, e. g. היכרין, היכמה, etc.⁷

Contents of the Inscription

The inscription opens with an appeal to the visitor to lament over the death of Jason. This appeal for lamentation at the beginning of the inscription is common in Greek inscriptions and can be seen, for instance, in the inscriptions in the Graeco-Jewish tombs at Tell el-Yehudieh (ancient Leontopolis) in Egypt.⁸

After the opening, the scribe appeals in the second person to the deceased himself, who was evidently the elderly head of the family, or a public figure. He wishes him peace within the tomb he had built for himself, evidently still during his lifetime. After this the scribe expresses the sorrow of Jason's friends over the death, which feeling will express itself in lamentations. The scribe, Honiah, finally adds his own lament on Jason, his brother (see the word אחי above line 1). Thus, the inscription may tentatively be translated:

1. *A powerful lament make for Jason, son of P . . . (my brother), Peace! . . .
Who hast built thyself a tomb, Elder, rest in Peace!*
2. . . . s
3. *Such a powerful lament will thy friends make for thee, who hast been . . .
Peace!*
4. *Honiah . . . great . . . lament like these, Peace!*

⁷ M. Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim . . .*, New York, 1950, s. v. היך, היכרין, היך, ילין, היכמה.

⁸ Frey, *op. cit.* (above, n. 2), Nos. 1507-1513, 1522. I owe this reference to Dr. B. Lifshitz.

Even with the gaps in this suggested interpretation of the inscription—which is written in a difficult language, and is moreover, partially damaged—it is clear that it is an Aramaic lamentation using formulae borrowed by the Jews from the Hellenistic world. The Jason inscription is unique in the Jewish-Aramaic epigraphy of the Hasmonean period, which is poor in epigraphic material. Besides its interest for the language, ideas of the period and its attitude towards a monumental tomb, the inscription is of exceptional interest palaeographically.

Palaeographic Examination

Below is a treatment of the paleographically decisive letters of the inscription, and of its position within the development of the Jewish cursive script (see the comparative chart in Fig. 2).

Alef—The form of this letter is the most characteristic of this cursive script. It originates in the normal *alef*, the left leg of which has dropped off, as found in the Bethpage inscription (there in the final position) and on other ossuaries (see the comparative chart). Our *alef* is formed by the two lines drawn in one stroke. This later led to the gamma-shaped *alef* found on ossuaries and in documents (see the comparative chart). In these there is often a distinction between the medial and final forms of *alef*.

Bet—Similarity to the numeral 2 is quite characteristic of the cursive *bet*.

He—The right leg juts upwards; the 'top' line slants down to meet it, while the left leg begins close to the corner and slants down to the left. Thus, it is similar to a reversed K.

Waw—Once it is long; several times it appears short.

Zayin—The head is emphasized to the right.

Het—The line joining the two legs is oblique, giving the letter a shape like an N, though another form also appears.

Kaf—Appears twice; once the vertical stroke has an inner bend. If this form is not incidental, then it may be compared with the *kaf* reminiscent of the numeral 3 which Albright discerned in the Nash Papyrus of the second century B. C.⁹

Lamed—The *lamed* is a simple vertical line, occasionally leaning to the left, to join up with the following letter, a definite characteristic of the cursive script.

⁹ Cf. N. Avigad: The Paleography of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Documents, *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 4 (1958), col. V.

Kefar Bebayu (134 A.D.)	Murabba'at 18 (35/6 A.D.)	Ossuaries	Bethpage	Jason	
א א א	א א א	א א א	א א א	א א א	א
ב ב ב	ב ב ב	ב ב ב	ב ב ב	ב ב ב	ב
ג ג ג		ג ג ג	ג ג ג	ג	ג
ד ד ד	ד ד ד	ד ד ד	ד ד ד	ד ד ד	ד
ה ה ה	ה ה ה	ה ה ה	ה ה ה	ה ה ה	ה
ו ו ו	ו ו ו	ו ו ו	ו ו ו	ו ו ו	ו
ז ז ז	ז ז ז	ז ז ז	ז ז ז	ז ז ז	ז
ח ח ח	ח ח ח	ח ח ח	ח ח ח	ח ח ח	ח
ט ט ט	ט ט ט	ט ט ט	ט ט ט	ט ט ט	ט
י י י	י י י	י י י	י י י	י י י	י
כ כ כ	כ כ כ	כ כ כ	כ כ כ	כ כ כ	כ
ל ל ל	ל ל ל	ל ל ל	ל ל ל	ל ל ל	ל
מ מ מ	מ מ מ	מ מ מ	מ מ מ	מ מ מ	מ
נ נ נ	נ נ נ	נ נ נ	נ נ נ	נ נ נ	נ
ס ס ס	ס ס ס	ס ס ס	ס ס ס	ס ס ס	ס
ע ע ע	ע ע ע	ע ע ע	ע ע ע	ע ע ע	ע
פ פ פ	פ פ פ	פ פ פ	פ פ פ	פ פ פ	פ
צ צ צ	צ צ צ	צ צ צ	צ צ צ	צ צ צ	צ
ק ק ק	ק ק ק	ק ק ק	ק ק ק	ק ק ק	ק
ר ר ר	ר ר ר	ר ר ר	ר ר ר	ר ר ר	ר
ש ש ש	ש ש ש	ש ש ש	ש ש ש	ש ש ש	ש
ת ת ת	ת ת ת	ת ת ת	ת ת ת	ת ת ת	ת

Fig. 2. Comparative chart of alphabets.

Mem—The closed *mem* is used here both finally and medially. This is found in many inscriptions and documents of this period.

Samekh—The *samekh* in the cursive script was generally closed, as here in lines 1 and 2. However, if the reading טגי in the last line is correct, this represents a type of open *samekh* used in documents of the third-second centuries B.C. A close parallel to the form of our letter is found in the Ecclesiastes Scroll ascribed to the middle of the second century B. C.¹⁰

Shin—The semi-cursive *shin* differs from line to line.

Taw—The cursive *taw* has a loop formed by continuous script, without raising the pen. This form first appears in the second century B. C. Nash Papyrus and continues to be used in documents of the Bar Kokhba period.

The tomb of Jason is ascribed on the basis of the archaeological data (see the Excavation Report above p. 94) to the time of Alexander Janneus, i. e. about the beginning of the first century B. C. It was evidently destroyed at the start of Herod's reign. It is reasonable to assume that the original owner of the tomb was Jason, to whom the larger inscription was devoted in the corridor of the tomb; thus the inscription should also be ascribed to the same period. If so this is the oldest inscription written in a Jewish cursive script¹¹ found so far.

As a close parallel in time and style, mention should be made of the 'List of Workers' incised on the lid of an ossuary from the Bethpage cave near Jerusalem, usually ascribed to the first century B. C. on palaeographical grounds (see the comparative chart). Similar cursive script is found on various ossuaries generally ascribed to the Herodian period. Only with the discovery of dated documents in the Dead Sea region was it possible to define the period of the cursive script more exactly.

The oldest document written in cursive is from the reign of Tiberius (beginning of the first century A. D.). The fragments of this document were found in Qumrân cave 4 and are as yet unpublished.¹² An Aramaic contract from the reign of Nero bearing the date A. D. 55/56 found in Wadi Murabba'at, is written in a developed cursive script;¹³ here for the first time there appears the fluid

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, col. VI.

¹¹ The term 'Jewish script' instead of 'square script' or 'Assyrian script' was instituted by F. M. Cross in his basic and important study: *The Development of the Jewish Scripts, The Bible and Ancient Near East, Essays in honor of W. F. Albright*, G. E. Wright ed., New York, 1961, pp. 133-202.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹³ See the comparative chart (from Benoit et al., *op. cit.* [above, n. 3], *Murabba'at* No. 18, Fig. 24, Pl. XXIX).

script rich with ligatures. An ostracon found at Masada evidently dates to just before the fall of the fortress in A. D. 73.¹⁴ Many other ostraca written in a developed cursive script have now been recovered during the recent excavations at Masada.¹⁵ The discoveries in Wadi Murabba'at and Nahal Ḥever furnished many documents, in Aramaic and Hebrew, from the second century A. D., written in a flowing cursive.¹⁶

A comparison between the script of the Jason inscription from the Hasmonean period, and the Herodian script, and down to the cursive of the Bar Kokhba period, indicates a great similarity among them, and even actual identity of form in the crucial letters, such as א, ב, ה, ל, מ, and נ. The major difference between the Jason inscription and the later, penned documents is the absence of ligatures in the former. A few letters (פ, ש) have not yet taken on their true cursive character.

The Jason inscription fills a certain gap which existed in the scheme of development of the Jewish cursive script in the first century B. C., the first indications of which lie in the semi-cursive of the second century B. C.

II. INSCRIPTIONS INDICATING A DATE

This two-line inscription is written on the plastered eastern wall of the porch. The small letters (height 4 mm) are penned in black ink in an elegant scribe's hand (Pl. 27A). The first line, 3 cm long, reads:

On the 26th of

ב 26 ל =



After the *lamed*, which is written with a very pleasing stroke, the scribe broke off and left the line as it is. This was evidently brought about by an error in the date, for in the second line the scribe started again, writing:

*On the 24th of Elul
in the year . . .*

ב 24 לאלול שנת =



¹⁴ M. Avi-Yonah, N. Avigad, Y. Aharoni, I. Dunayewsky and S. Gutman: The Archaeological Survey of Masada, 1955-1956, *IEJ* 7 (1957), Pl. 16c.

¹⁵ Y. Yadin: *Masada*, London, 1966, pp. 95, 190, 191, 201.

¹⁶ Cf. Benoit et al. *op. cit.* (above, n. 3), Murabba'at Nos. 19, 26, 27, 30; Yadin, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3), Pl. 22c. For the last column of the comparative chart of alphabets (Fig. 2), see Avigad, *op. cit.* (above, n. 9), col. XXXII (after *RB* 61 [1954], Pl. IV).

This line is located 7 cm below the first and is 5 cm long. Unfortunately, the plaster at the end of the line is damaged and the year is lost. Judging from the size of the damaged area, there were no more than three to four letters or numerals, i. e. the space was sufficient for only the year, with no indication of era.

It is most likely that the scribe intended to set down the date of his visit to the tomb, or the date of burial of one of the deceased, possibly even of Jason himself. Palaeographically, this inscription is easily dated to the same period, on the basis of the long forms of the *nun* and the *taw* in the word *שנת*. The long *taw* is typical of documents of the third-second centuries B. C.,¹⁷ and the beginning of the first century B. C. would be the latest possible date for this inscription. The numerals here are those in use from the time of the Elephantine-Papyri of the fifth century B. C. down to that of the Bar Kokhba Letters.

It is surprising to find on a wall such elegant formal script, generally used on leather scrolls or papyrus. One of the family of those interred in the tomb was evidently a scribe, who brought his scribal equipment in order to set down the date of the burial on the smooth plaster.

III. FRAGMENTARY INSCRIPTIONS

On the above eastern wall of the corridor, another group of four lines was found inscribed (Pl. 27C), as well as a single line (Pl. 27B), all written with a pen in ink. They are in such a poor condition so as to preclude any discussion of their contents.

The four lines are divisible on a stylistic basis into two groups of two lines each: The two upper rows are written in a formal script. In the topmost line various letters are discernible: ... אנובאלף ... ל... יו of which the word *אלף* can be made out. In the second line, *alef*, *bet*, *tet* and *samekh* (?) are visible.

The third line is in a different hand, in a cursive script. It begins with a *lamed*, in the middle of the line is a very clear cursive *mem*, followed by what is evidently a ligature of *nun* and *het* (the latter with its left leg missing). To the right of the *mem* a semicircle is visible, open at the top, possibly a ligature of *בר*.¹⁸ Thus, there may have been written here the words: *בר מנחם*. If this is correct, it is a very old occurrence of such a ligature, even if the inscription is

¹⁷ See Avigad, *ibid.*, col. IV; and see also Cross, *op. cit.* (above, n. 11), Fig. 1, 1.4; Fig. 1.1.

¹⁸ Cf. Murabba'at No. 30 (Benoit et al, *op. cit.* [above, n. 3], Pl. XLI bis).

ascribed to the end of the period of use of the tomb, i. e. the end of the first century B. C.

To the left of the above line there are traces of large letters in a different style, beginning with a narrow and tall *kaf*. In the fourth line the letters are hardly discernible, with the exception of a *lamed*.

The single-line inscription (Pl. 27B) is also written in a small formal hand and is completely obscure.

The last inscription in the corridor is written in charcoal on the western wall, beneath a drawing of a warship. It contains two lines (Pl. 27D). The script is crude, the letters square and large (5 cm high), and mostly rubbed out. Traces of the following letters may possibly be discerned—in the first line: שסכל...ר; in the second: בנ.בר.