

THE GREEK INSCRIPTIONS OF
THE JEWS OF ROME

HARRY J. LEON

THE TEXTS OF THE INSCRIPTIONS from the Jewish catacombs of Rome are available in J. B. Frey's *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum. I. Europe* (Città del Vaticano, 1936), 6–390. Of the 529 inscriptions which Frey regards as belonging to the Jews of ancient Rome, some must be rejected either as of uncertain provenience or as not demonstrably Jewish or even as spurious. Besides, as I have demonstrated elsewhere,¹ several inscriptions allegedly found in Porto were actually taken to that place from Rome and should be included among the Judeo-Roman inscriptions. In addition, some of the items which Frey places in an appendix as probably pagan should be regarded as genuinely Jewish. In the texts themselves as presented by Frey, there are, as I discovered through personal examination of the inscriptions, many errors of transcription.² Yet, despite these shortcomings, Frey's *Corpus* is now, and will likely be for some time, the standard collection. Consequently, my references to the inscriptions by number are in accordance with the arrangement in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*.

Of the 534 items which I think may legitimately be counted as Jewish inscriptions of Rome, 405 (76%) are Greek; of the rest, 123 (23%) are Latin, three are Hebrew, one Aramaic, one bilingual Greek and Latin, one bilingual Aramaic and Greek. From these figures it is quite apparent that the Roman-Jewish community, which existed from about 100 B.C., was Greek-speaking. The Latin inscriptions appear to belong to a more Romanized element in the group.

In a paper read before the American Philological Association some thirty years ago,³ I pointed out that the Roman

¹ "The Jewish Community of Ancient Porto," *Harv. Theol. Rev.*, 45 (1952), 165–175.

² My corrections of Frey's *Corpus* will appear in a forthcoming book on the Jews of ancient Rome. For some of these corrections, see L. Robert, *Rev. Ét. Juives*, 101 (1937), 73–86; also *Hellenica*, 3 (1946), 90–108; and my review in *Jewish Quart. Rev.*, 28 (1938), 357–361.

³ "The Language of the Greek Inscriptions from the Jewish Catacombs of Rome," *Trans. Amer. Philol. Assn.*, 58 (1927), 210–233. My more recent study of the inscriptions has produced some corrections and additions, but the basic percentages and conclusions of the original paper have not been changed.

Jews spoke no special Greek dialect in any way comparable to the Yiddish or Ladino of more recent times. Since all the inscriptions are sepulchral, examples of vocabulary, idiom, and syntactical peculiarities are necessarily limited, but the indications are that the Greek of the Jewish community at Rome was not materially different from the *koiné* Greek of the Mediterranean lands during the Graeco-Roman period.

Errors in spelling and instances of transliteration between Greek and Latin words and names proved to be especially useful as evidence for pronunciation. The very frequent confusion of *αι* and *ε* and of *ει* and *ι* reveals that the original diphthongs *αι* and *ει* were already pronounced as in modern Greek, a pronunciation which we know prevailed generally by the beginning of the Christian era. On the other hand, *οι* and *υ*, though pronounced alike, were not yet pronounced like *ι*, as they are at present, but they seem to have been close to the sound of German *ü* or French *u*. The vowel *η* still had its ancient *e* sound, as is clear from its being frequently interchanged with *ε*. In only a few instances is *η* confused with *ι*, and these occur in inscriptions which show a low level of literacy in other respects.

The consonants seem essentially to have retained their classical pronunciations, except that *φ* was already equivalent in sound to Latin *f*. The other aspirate consonants, *θ* and *χ*, were still pronounced as aspirates; *β*, *γ*, and *δ* had not become spirants, as they are in modern Greek.

Variations from the norm in inflections and syntax are few and not especially significant. Worth citing is the nominative ending *-ους* instead of *-ος*, on the analogy of Latin *-us*. Examples are *Ἐπιγενίους* (323), *νηπιούς* (162), *Σελευκούς* (52). In many instances *-ις* is found instead of *-ιος* in the nominative of masculine names. Such are, to cite a few, *Εύσεβις* (114, 119, 332, 333), *Καίλις* (365), *Ἄστερις* (95, 305), *Μακεδονίς* (370). The genitives and datives of both these groups have the regular endings *-ου* and *-ιου*, *-ω* and *-ιω*, respectively. It should be noted that no iota subscript (or adscript) is used in the dative, nor, in fact, is there any example of such an iota in this group of inscriptions.

Instead of *-εὺς* in the nominative, such nouns as *γραμματεὺς* and *ιερεὺς* occasionally show *-εος* (142, 146) and *-εους* (99, 148, 346). The verb forms, apart from a few garbled instances, are correct, but except for such words as *κέλται*, *ἐβίωσεν*, *ἐποίησεν*, these sepulchral inscriptions show comparatively few verbs. Other grammatical peculiarities are sporadic and fail to reveal characteristics which can be attributed to the group as a whole.

An interesting feature of the Greek inscriptions, aside from the linguistic peculiarities, is the use of sepulchral formulas. More than two-thirds start with the phrase "Here lies" (*ἐνθάδε κέλται*), and at least half end with the formula "In peace be his (her, their) sleep" (*ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ κοίμησις αὐτοῦ οἱ αὐτῆς* or *αὐτῶν*). Not infrequently the wish is expressed that the deceased may sleep "among the righteous" (*μετὰ τῶν δικαίων* or *μετὰ τῶν ὁσίων*). The aphorism in *Proverbs* 10.7, "The memory of the righteous shall be for a blessing," appears as *μνήμη* (or *μνεία*) *δικαίου εἰς εὐλογίαν* (86, 370) or *μνήμη δικαίου σὺν ἐγκωμίῳ* (201). The exhortation "Be of good courage; no one is immortal" (*θάρσει οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος*), which occurs also in pagan and Christian inscriptions, is found five times in the Jewish inscriptions of Rome (314, 335, 380, 401, 450). It is especially touching as found on the grave of the child Euphrasius, who died at the age of three years and ten months (335), and on that of the infant Samuel, who lived only one year and five months (401).

Besides linguistic data, these inscriptions, both Greek and Latin, reveal the names of 551 individual members of the Jewish community, the names of eleven of their synagogues, the organization of the community, the titles of their communal officials,⁴ and other significant facts about the life of the Roman Jews, who may have numbered as many as forty thousand during the early Empire, forming one of the two or three largest Jewish groups in the Diaspora of that time. This phase of the subject, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

⁴ See H. J. Leon, "The Names of the Jews of Ancient Rome," *Trans. Amer. Philol. Assn.*, 59 (1928), 205-224; "New Material about the Jews of Ancient Rome," *Jewish Quart. Rev.*, 20 (1929/30), 301-312. These matters will be treated extensively in the book mentioned above.