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NOTE ON

L. Y. RAHMANI, *A CATALOGUE OF JEWISH OSSUARIES*, NOS. 319 AND 322

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NOTE ON  
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During a relatively short time in antiquity, the Jews of Palestine were accustomed to rebury the bones of their dead - presumably about one year after the first funeral - in stone receptacles, or ossuaries, rectangular boxes hewn out of a block of stone or directly out of the rock, and covered with a lid. This custom was in vogue from the last quarter of the first century BCE till the middle of the third century CE. Excavations have yielded hundreds of ossuaries, particularly from first century CE Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Recently a long awaited corpus of those ossuaries has been published by L.Y. Rahmani, under the title: *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel*.<sup>1</sup>

A fair amount of the ossuaries is entirely plain, and whenever they do bear an inscription, this is usually a short one, mostly just mentioning the name of the deceased. Only a few inscriptions are more extensive and interesting, namely those which mention a prohibition or adjuration on any disturbance of this last resting place (on ossuaries nos. 70, 259, possibly also on no. 455), sometimes accompanied by a curse on the evil-doer (on ossuary no. 559, probably also on no. 142), which is known as an 'epigraphical convention' throughout the Middle East and especially from the second to fourth century CE epitaphs from Asia Minor. In addition there are some very intriguing ones, due to their enigmatic character, namely those on ossuaries nos. 319 and 322, which are the subject of this note.

Ossuaries nos. 319 and 322, both from the western slope of Mount Scopus and *ante* 135 CE, bear inscriptions which consist of only four letters. Both are written on one of the short sides of the chest. No. 319 has in very large script: ΙΦΚΧ. The one on no. 322 reads ΧΨ | ΑΒ, with the letters alpha and beta of the second line slightly at the left under the chi and psi - if this is really a two-line inscription, for the script may as well form a sort of zigzag line and be read ΑΧΒΨ.

According to Rahmani, the letters of these inscriptions cannot be interpreted, though he offers the suggestion put forward by V. Tzaferis that they may be initials. It seems to me, however, that we can add a few lines to Rahmani's comment, although I do not propose to offer a definitive solution.

It strikes the eye that the inscriptions consist of two pairs of successive letters of the alphabet: iota-kappa and phi - chi in no. 319, and alpha - beta and chi - psi in no. 322. The letters of the two pairs are not written in the usual alphabetical sequence, however, but are combined with each other, most clearly so in no. 319 (iota - phi, kappa - chi) and probably also in no. 322 (alpha - chi, beta - psi). This reminds one of the so-called 'atbash' arrangement of the alphabet. Atbash is an abbreviation, derived from the Hebrew alphabet, of alef-taw beth-shin, and designates the alphabet in 'interchanged order', i.e. the first letter (alef) is followed by the last (taw), the second letter (beth) is followed by the second last (shin), etc. (in the Latin alphabet this gives the arrangement azbycx ...). Though the designation atbash is an ancient Jewish one, the phenomenon is not specifically Jewish. From the Roman rhetor Quintilian (first century CE), we know that it was a customary school exercise not only to learn the alphabet in its usual order, but also in its reversed order, and in the sequence ΑΩΒΨΓΧ, etc.<sup>2</sup> Several graffiti from Pompeii

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<sup>1</sup> Jerusalem 1994. Note that the catalogue is not comprehensive. It comprises *only* the ossuaries in the collections of the State of Israel. A large collection like the one from 'Dominus Fleuit', for instance, is not included.

<sup>2</sup> *Inst. orat.*, I, 1, 25. The reference is from F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, Leipzig - Berlin 1922, 17.

and Herculaneum with the letter sequence AXBVCTDSERFQGPHOINKML may be explained this way.<sup>3</sup>

Jerome too was acquainted with this permutation of the alphabet for pedagogical use, but he also knew of a different use, namely as an exegetical method. In his commentary on Jeremiah 25:26, he remarks that the name Sesach in this text, should be understood as Babel, for, just as „apud nos Graecum alfabetum usque ad novissimam litteram per ordinem legitur, hoc est ‚alfa, beta‘ et cetera usque ad ‚o‘, rursusque propter memoriam parvulorum solemus lectionis ordinem vertere et primis extrema miscere, ut dicamus ‚alfa o, beta psi‘, sic et apud Hebraeos primum est ‚aleph‘, secundum ‚beth‘, tertium ‚gimel‘ usque ad vicesimam secundam et extremam litteram ‚thau‘, cui paenultima est ‚sin‘. Legimus itaque ‚aleph tau, beth sin‘, cumque venerimus ad medium, ‚lamed‘ litterae occurrit ‚caph‘; et ut, si recte legatur, legimus ‚Babel‘, ita ordine commutato legimus ‚Sesach‘.“ The reason why the text has Sesach instead of Babel, is, according to Jerome, due to the caution of the prophet not to provoke the power that besieged Jerusalem at that time.<sup>4</sup>

The atbash arrangement of the alphabet was known by the rabbis too, both as a school exercise and as an exegetical method. In for instance the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 22a, the atbash principle is used to explain the phrase in Dan 5:8, 15, that the sages of the Babylonian king were not able to read or interpret the writing on the wall, while Daniel could, because (according to Rab) the message was written as ‚YTT YTT ADK PUGHMT‘ - incomprehensible indeed - which are the interchanged letters of ‚MNA MNA TKL UFRSYN.‘ As for its pedagogical use, several different permutations of the alphabetical order are mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbath* 104a. Not only can each letter be paired with or transposed by its ‚counterpart‘ in the alphabetical sequence (‚atbash‘; with regard to the Greek alphabet this would be alpha - ômega, bêta - psi, etc.), the alphabet can also be split in the middle into two parts of eleven letters each, so that alef corresponds with lamed, beth with mem, etc. (‚albam‘; with regard to the Greek alphabet: alpha - nu, bêta - xi), or each letter can be paired with or transposed by the following seventh letter (‚aḥas‘). The pairs - or even string - of letters which are made this way, function as an abbreviation of some words or even of a whole sentence, for instance: ‚AT BaSh ‚if you (*attah*) are ashamed (*bosh*) [to sin], then GaR DaḲ, dwell (*gur*) in heaven (*dok*).‘<sup>5</sup>

Apart from atbash as a school exercise and as a means of speaking out not too clearly or in a cryptographic way, still another use is known. Without any exegetical purpose discernable, we find the atbash arrangement being used in the magical papyri for the seven vocals (ΑΩΕΥΗΟΙ). In *PGM* II, XIII, l. 904, for instance, one is instructed to write on a goldleaf αωευηοι, and on a silver leaf ιοηυεωα (by being written in the atbash arrangement, the two inscriptions together form a palindrome). In *PGM* I, IV, l. 1183, Helios ‚the father of the world‘ is invoked by his name αωευηοιοηυεωα (which is also a palindrome).<sup>6</sup> From a Jewish context too, we have some indubitable instances of a magical function of atbash. In an amulet ‚for the protection of Marian daughter of Sarah and her foetus‘ the complete atbash sequence is found<sup>7</sup>; its use seems to be comparable with the use of the seven vocals in atbash arrangement in *PGM* I, IV, namely as an invocation. One of the magical recipes from the Cairo-geniza contains a „somewhat unclear set of instructions connected with speculations based on various arrangements of the alphabet.“<sup>8</sup> The designations which are used in this recipe for those various arrangements are

<sup>3</sup> M.D. Coogan, ‚Alphabets and Elements,‘ *BASOR* 216 (1974) 62 (*CIL* IV, nos. 5472, 5499, 6905, 6907, and 9272).

<sup>4</sup> In *Hieremiam* V, 27, 2-3 (ed. S. Reiter, *CCSL*, Turnholt 1960, 245-6).

<sup>5</sup> Translation by H. Freedman, in: I. Epstein (ed.), *The Babylonian Talmud: Shabbath*, London 1938, 501.

<sup>6</sup> K. Preisendanz, *Papyri graecae magicae*, Leipzig - Berlin, vol I: 1928, vol. II: 1931. Both papyri date probably from the fourth century CE. See also A. Dieterich, *Abraxas*, Leipzig 1891, 201; F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> J. Naveh - S. Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, Jerusalem 1993, Amulet no. 28, ll. 21-22. No specific date is given; Naveh and Shaked suppose a dating from the fourth to the sixth or seventh century CE for the Aramaic magic bowls and amulets in general (*Amulets and Magic Bowls*, Jerusalem - Leiden 1985, 13).

<sup>8</sup> *Magic Spells and Formulae*, 216-219, ll. 9-13.

,atbash', ,albam' and ,aḥas'; interestingly, the designations in this magical text correspond with the three different arrangements of the alphabet which were mentioned in Tb *Shabbath* 104a.<sup>9</sup>

It is very likely that Rahmani's ossuary inscriptions nos. 319 and 322 are some sort of atbash arrangement. The occurrence of two pairs of letters of which the first and last letters of each are sequential in the alphabet is too striking to be coincidental, or to be explained as initials. This is especially the case for no. 319 (I Φ K Ψ), a clear example of ,albam' arrangement:

A B Γ Δ E Z H Θ I K Λ M  
N Ξ O Π P Σ T Y Φ X Ψ Ω

No. 322 (X Ψ | A B, or A X B Ψ) is less clear, unfortunately. But in this case too, the alphabetical sequence of the letters can hardly be coincidental. Probably we have here the ,aḥas' type of arrangement in which a combination is made of one letter with (one of) the following seventh letters:

A B Γ Δ E Z H  
Θ I K Λ M N Ξ  
O Π P Σ T Y Φ  
X Ψ Ω<sup>10</sup>

In view of the funereal context of those inscriptions, they can hardly have been school exercises. That cryptography is at stake - which supposes that another word should be read instead of the one which is written, by means of a transposition of the letters by their ,counterparts' - is not likely either, for when we do transpose the letters of the inscriptions by means of different atbash methods, the new words are as unreadable as the old one. More probable is that the inscriptions either are an abbreviation, or that they were meant to serve a magical purpose. As for the first possibility, there seems to be no way, however, to determine what such an abbreviation could stand for. From the Hebrew alphabet we have a list of ,atbash abbreviations' in Tb *Shabbat* 104a, but to my knowledge, no such list of Greek ,atbash abbreviations' is known. As for the second possibility - a magical function of the inscriptions - we stand on firmer ground. Atbash is a special arrangement of the alphabet; now the alphabet in its regular sequence is known to have served as a magical means, among Jews, Christians and pagans alike, especially so in a funereal context.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, in the Roman Christian cemetery of S. Alessandro

<sup>9</sup> For non-Jewish examples of this ,Buchstabenspiel', with the sequence AEIN (every fourth letter), see Wm. Brashear, ,Lese Früchte (2)', *ZPE* 50 (1983) 98-99, and id., ,Holz- und Wachstafeln der Sammlung Kiseleff, 2. Teil,' *Enchoria* 14 (1986) 14-16, with a survey of the various interpretations and a bibliography (I thank Prof. Dr D. Hagedorn for this reference).

<sup>10</sup> There is a third inscription (no. 582), on which Rahmani comments: ,The significance of the Greek letters [...] remains enigmatic, though they might represent initials", with reference to nos. 319 and 322. The text, which unfortunately is rather unclear, reads in Rahmani's transcription: K·NIΦ (with facsimile). As in no. 319, no. 582 has, according to Rahmani's transcription, the pair iota - kappa. The second and fourth letters, nu and phi, however, are not successive in the alphabet. Since the reading of the two first letters is not at all clear, one wonders if another reading might be possible instead of the one proposed by Rahmani. If this inscription too was meant to be some sort of atbash arrangement, we might expect the last two letters iota and phi - whose reading seems to be fairly sure - to form a pair with respectively the letter following or preceding iota and with the one following or preceding phi in the alphabetical sequence, in which case the first letter of the inscription should be either thêta or kappa, and the second letter either ypsilon or psi. Kappa is indeed proposed by Rahmani as the most probable lecture of the first letter, but the second is certainly not ypsilon or psi. Therefore this inscription might have nothing to do with atbash. Unlike the ossuaries nos. 319 and 322, however, this ossuary bears also another inscription, an Aramaic one, in two lines on one of the large sides of the chest, of which the second line is a repetition of the first (שלום אמתה אמס), ,Shalom, wife of Amas'). Perhaps the four letters are in the Hebrew script too, and not in Greek? Three of the four letters can easily be read as letters in Hebrew instead of Greek script, that is to say, only when one assumes that they are written in mirror-writing: in that case the first three letters are he, alef (or het?), and waw. The fourth letter remains problematic, though.

<sup>11</sup> A. Dieterich, ,ABC-Denkmäler,' *Kleine Schriften*, Leipzig - Berlin 1911, 202-228 (= *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 56 (1901) 77-105); F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, Leipzig - Berlin <sup>2</sup>1925 (first edition: 1922); M. Schwabe - B. Lifshitz, *Beth She'arim II, The Greek Inscriptions*, New Brunswick NY 1974, 46-47; R. Hachlili, ,The Goliath

not only an inscription with the regular sequence of the alphabet was found, but also an atbash-inscription (AXBVCT, etc.),<sup>12</sup> which might point to the direction of a magical interpretation of the alphabet in atbash arrangement. In Jewish as well as in non-Jewish graves, the alphabet-inscriptions most likely served as an apotropaic means, intended to protect the grave from any disturbance, whether by human intruders or by demons. The inscriptions on ossuaries nos. 319 and 322 might have fulfilled a similar function. The interpretation of the inscriptions as magical leaves unexplained, however, why only the four letters IΦKX and AXBΨ were chosen. Nevertheless, in view of the function of the alphabet in its regular sequence in a funereal context, the odds are high that these sequences of letters served a similar purpose.

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Family in Jericho: Funerary Inscriptions from a First Century AD Jewish Monumental Tomb,' *BASOR* 235 (1979) 48, and ead., 'Did the Alphabet Have a Magical Meaning in the First Century C.E.?', *Cathedra* 31 (1984) 27-30 [Hebr.]; A.J. Bij de Vaate, 'Alphabet-Inscriptions from Jewish Graves,' in: J.W. van Henten - P.W. van der Horst (eds.), *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy* (Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 21), Leiden - New York - Köln 1994, 148-161.

<sup>12</sup> A. Dieterich, 'ABC-Denkmäler,' 210.