Early Jewish Epigraphy: Where Do We Stand?

1 Introduction

My interest in early Jewish epigraphy was initially triggered by a chance find, more than 25 years ago. In the Utrecht University Library, I was looking up an article in a volume but I could not find it immediately and had to leaf through the whole issue to look for it. While doing so my eye was caught by a curious line of Greek text saying: βοήθησον, κύριε, τοῦ ῥαββί, “Lord, help the rabbi!” The first thing to strike my eye was, of course, the strange genitive (τοῦ ῥαββί) instead of the usual dative, a phenomenon, however, that I could explain in view of the gradual disappearance of the dative from classical Greek in the post-classical period. But much stranger was the interpretation of this text by the Italian author of the article. The Greek text was inscribed upon a pillar found during excavations in the Cyrenaica in ancient Libya and without the slightest justification the Italian editor identified the rabbi as the bishop of the local Christian community. I decided on the spot to write an article in order to rectify this obviously wrong interpretation. At about the same time, Martin Hengel urged me in a private conversation to take a close look at a new inscription from Aphrodisias (in Turkey) which he thought could shed new light upon the Jewish diaspora in Asia Minor (on this more below). I did so and this resulted in another article.

The research I had to do when preparing these articles opened my eyes to the rather sorry state of the study of ancient Jewish epigraphy (i.e., in the mid-80s of the previous century). There was no really comprehensive and authoritative collection of Jewish inscriptions from the Hellenistic to the Byzantine period. To be accurate, there was the Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum by the Catholic scholar Jean-Baptiste Frey, published in 2 volumes in 1936 and (posthumously)

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in 1952.\footnote{J.-B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum. Recueil des inscriptions juives qui vont du IIe siècle avant Jésus-Christ au VIIe siècle de notre ère* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2 vols., 1936–1952). This work will be referred to as *cij*; the sometimes used abbreviation *cii* should be avoided since it also stands for *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*. Frey died in 1940.} However, this work is very far from perfect, to put it mildly; it is incomplete, but it also contains inscriptions which do not belong there; and there are many other signs of sloppiness.\footnote{Vol. 1 of *cij* was re-edited by B. Lifshitz, who wrote a very extensive Prolegomenon to this 1975 reprint in which he proposed a considerable number of corrections and additions. But, unfortunately, Lifshitz died before he could start to work on vol. 2 (covering Asia and Egypt), which is still more deficient than vol. 1.} Another desideratum was an annual overview of newly found material such as existed (and still exists) for (mostly pagan and Christian) Greek and Latin epigraphical material (*Bulletin Épigraphique* [BE], *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* [SEG], *Année Épigraphique* [AE] and others). The publications of most of the new finds in the field of ancient Jewish epigraphy were scattered over a very wide variety of journals in many languages and over Festschriften. For the uninitiated it was almost impossible to find one’s way to all this material. What one needs in such a situation is simply an introduction to the study of early Jewish epigraphy to help the beginning student. But such a thing did not exist. For that reason, I decided that I had to write such an introduction myself. And I did so in the academic year 1990/1991, several months of which I spent on a sabbatical leave at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where I collected most of the material. The book appeared in 1991 as *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs. An Introductory Survey of a Millennium of Jewish Funerary Epigraphy (300 BCE–700 CE)*.\footnote{Kampen: Kok-Pharos, 1991.}

There were several reasons for this relative neglect of the area of early Jewish epigraphy. Pagan and Christian Greek and Latin epigraphy have flourished since the 19th century and ever since then it has been an integral part of the study of the world of classical antiquity. This was a logical consequence of the enormous quantity of inscriptions in these fields, which grew in pace with the growing number of archaeological excavations in many areas of the classical world. But most classical epigraphists were not at all interested in Jewish material; they had no eye for it.\footnote{This is painfully illustrated in the third edition of the *Guide de l’épigraphiste* (eds. F. Bérard et alii, Paris: Éditions Rue d’Ulm, 2000). This otherwise excellent and authoritative reference work is extremely weak on Jewish epigraphy.} Moreover, Jewish material was very scarce in comparison to this other material. On the other hand, Semitic epigraphers