Book Reviews

Michael Owen Wise

*Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea. A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents.*


The project of the present work is to base an analysis of language use in Roman Judaea on the epigraphic remains from this period. Literary works from the Roman era are numerous, but they are known only from later, in some cases much later, manuscripts, and their date and geographic origin is consequently uncertain. The epigraphic material was found in Judaea and testifies in many ways to having been written there. Many of the epigraphic texts are explicitly dated and most of the others can be dated on paleographic or archaeo-
logical grounds. Specifically, the book is based on 145 documents—contracts and letters—found in caves near the Dead Sea, some in controlled searches and others by Bedouin. Many of the documents are not narrowly tied to the Bar Kokhba war and the earliest of them may go back to the first century BCE. This justifies the title’s reference to the Roman period—between Pompey’s con-
quest of Jerusalem and the end of the second Jewish war. The documents are written in four languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Nabataean. Thus, the question arises: to what extent and in which settings were these languages spoken and written in Roman Judaea? Wise’s book is an elaborate and sophisti-
cated answer to this question.

The first chapter goes over the history of research and situates the present study within it. The question of the use of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in Palestine in the first century CE has usually arisen in regard to the question of the language of Jesus. In the nineteenth century, scholars like Abraham Geiger and Gustav Dalman forcefully opted for Aramaic as the only native language of Jews in the home, with Hebrew and Greek used mostly in writing or in exceptional situations. In the twentieth century, Moshe Segal argued that Mishnaic Hebrew reflects a language spoken in Palestine before the Jewish wars, and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed that Hebrew was widely

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spoken around the turn of the era. The importance of Greek, too, was revisited, notably in light of the frequent use of Greek in tomb inscriptions from this time. The question of literacy arose much more recently, and was discussed in depth only after the 1989 publication of William Harris’ book *Ancient Literacy*. Catherine Hezser’s study on *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (2001) paved the way, but focused mostly on the later, talmudic period. Against Hezser, Wise is able to demonstrate that the period of the Bar Kokhba documents was one of prolific writing and book production. The chapter ends with a quick review of the documentary texts that will provide the material for the rest of the book.

The following chapters go through the documents at length, treating first the materials from the more northern Wadi Murabbaat and its environs (chapter 2), then those from the more southern Wadi Habra (chapter 3). The investigation proceeds from the texts to the people connected to them—scribes, principals and witnesses—and onward to the social and historical setting of the people. The research is incredibly detailed, but it never just accumulates data. Wise is able to derive insight from minute features of script or language, to bring corroborating information from recondite sources, Jewish and non-Jewish, and to piece together a convincing picture on the basis of disparate data.

Chapter 4 focuses more narrowly on the Bar Kokhba Letters from the time of the Second Revolt. After setting the letters in the context of what is known about ancient epistolary culture in general, Wise sketches the historical background of the letters. He seeks out the reason for the use of each of the three languages, proposing that Bar Kokhba had imposed the use of Hebrew in all official correspondence, but that the ability of the individual scribe at times occasioned the use of Greek (only two letters) or Aramaic. The Hebrew and Aramaic subcorpora are each analyzed linguistically in detail.

The final chapter summarizes the results of the study and sets them, again, in a larger historical context. Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek were all used in both speaking and writing in Roman Judaea. Hebrew hadn’t died out as a living language, although it had changed to a point where its speakers were not necessarily capable of understanding biblical Hebrew. Aramaic too was widely spoken and written, and may have been the native language of a majority of Judaeans. Greek, finally, was spoken less and mostly limited to the higher classes, but it was certainly present as well. The book closes with an estimate of literacy rates in the three languages.

In spite of its polished style, Wise’s book is not an easy read. It is packed with information, and rare will be the readers familiar with all the subfields to which it seeks to contribute. In regard to its interdisciplinary nature, the book is a *tour de force*. Insights from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible are perhaps expected from someone who all his life has