
Spelling The Divine Name

Observations on Jewish Alphabetical Inscriptions

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In a recent study, Alice bij de Vatte presents an investigation into the unusual phenomenon of alphabet inscriptions from Jewish Graves.¹ These puzzling inscriptions, discovered in funerary contexts, possess none of the usual features expected of an epitaph—no name of the deceased, no commemoration of their life. Instead, the inscriptions consist solely of alphabetical sequences of letters, either Greek or Hebrew depending on the inscription. Bij de Vatte considers these Jewish funerary inscriptions in the context of the wider phenomenon of alphabetical inscriptions from throughout the Graeco-Roman world. Many of these inscriptions appear to have been possessed of ritual or ‘magical’ function.² Bij de Vatte concludes her study by suggesting that the Jewish alphabetical inscriptions were possessed of similar magical function and that their presence in funerary contexts was apotropaic, serving as protection for the resting-place of the deceased.³

Bij de Vatte’s suggestion that Jewish alphabet inscriptions shared in the magical significance apparently attributed to gentile Greek, Latin and Etruscan alphabet inscriptions is largely convincing. But, for all that she is able to demonstrate that the contextual evidence points to some sort of ritual power being attributed by Jews to the alphabet, Bij de Vatte’s study leaves unanswered—indeed unasked—the question: why did Jews believe the alphabet to be invested with such power? This is the question which I wish to examine here.

From the portfolio of evidence for Jewish alphabet inscriptions collected together in Bij de Vatte’s study,

there are several texts which I believe indicate a possible answer to this question:

- 1- An Ostrakon from Murabba`at (DJD II, no.73), first century BCE, preserves the alphabet in Hebrew script followed by two or three proper names;
- 2- An Ostrakon from Herodion, of unspecified date, bears on one side the letters of the Hebrew Alphabet from aleph to samech, and on the other side, the complete Hebrew alphabet twice, followed by the proper name Ahyahu;⁴
- 3- An Ostrakon, probably from Herodion and dating from between the two Jewish wars, bears the full alphabet over two lines in Hebrew script, followed by a list of theophoric names, all but two ending in the element ‘יהוה’, which form an acrostic on the letters of the alphabet from aleph to samech;⁵
- 4- A non-Jewish magical recipe cited by Bij de Vatte as an example of the apotropaic power attributed to the alphabet in the Graeco-Roman world contains the following instructions: ‘In order to remain safe on the field of battle: fast for three days and then, on a virgin page, in a mixture of the blood of an unblemished dove and a calf, write your name, your mother’s and father’s name and the alphabet. Carry it with you when you go to war, remain chaste, and no harm will befall you.’⁶ (Trans. adapted);
- 5- A similar recipe reads: ‘If you want an enemy never to attack you or to do anything against

you: write your name, your parents' names, the name of the archon Michael and the alphabet on virgin paper using the blood of an unblemished white cock-bury it in the earth near the city-gate⁷ (Trans. adapted).

Examination of the above texts reveals that they all share one feature in common: the inscription of the alphabet occurs in the same context as the listing of proper names. In (1) and (2), the alphabet precedes a statement of proper names. In (3), the alphabet precedes an alphabetic acrostic of theophoric proper names. In (4) and (5), the ritual practitioner is instructed to list first their own name, then their parents' names, then, in (5), the name of an angel, then in both (4) and (5), the alphabet. This, we would suggest, is significant. The writing of the alphabet in the context of listings of proper names invites us to read the appearance of the alphabet in these texts as the inclusion of yet another proper name—that is, in the context of these documents, the alphabet is construed as a proper name.

How can the alphabet—which would normally not even be considered to properly constitute a word—be read as a proper name? And whose name?

The use in late antique ritual contexts of words that possess no semantic sense, but clearly bear contextual meaning, is well attested in the form of the so-called *voces magicae*. A brief perusal of the Greek Magical Papyri reveals numerous examples of ritual texts containing such *voces magicae*.⁸ These words—usually of indeterminate origin (although occasionally decipherable as fragments of Aramaic, Coptic or Hebrew) and possessed of no inherent sense—are often declared to be the secret names of a divine being and are the words of power which supply the force to render the ritual at hand effective.⁹ These nonsensical words are, in effect, divine names and the ritual texts in which they appear harness and direct their power. This use of divine names is characteristic of the

theories of non-referential and automatically effective language which were common in the Graeco-Roman and late antique worlds. Divine names did not merely represent—they embodied the power of the being which they signified. To utter a divine name was to manifest the power of the divinity concerned.¹⁰

The use of such *voces magicae* is not restricted to pagan Greek ritual texts and *voces magicae* are well attested in Jewish sources where they are usually construed as the names of angelic beings, or of God himself. Even the most cursory inspection of the Hekhalot literature reveals numerous examples of such divine names, as does *Sefer ha-Razim* and the ritual texts from the Cairo Geniza.¹¹ The suggestion made here is that the appearance of the alphabet in Jewish inscriptions is yet another example of such use of *voces magicae*. The alphabet—either partial or complete, in either Greek or Hebrew, both functioning as sacred languages for various Judaism of the Roman and Late Antique periods—is employed as a divine name, invoking the effective power inherent in such a name to the end described by the ritual text in which it appears.

Specific evidence of such use of the alphabet in Jewish ritual texts may be cited. In a Jewish ritual text from the Cairo Geniza (T-S K 1.70 2), lines 7-8, we find the following alphabetical text:

א ב ג ד יהוה ... יהא עוזר וסומך ל פ ב פ

'B G D YHWH (...) will help and support X b.Y.

Here, in the context of a ritual text for protection—a fragment from a magical recipe book—the first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet are construed with, and appear to form a part of, the divine name.

In another Geniza text, (T-S K 1.157 lines 12-23), lines 21-23, we find the following closing formula:

תיבכי באתריך דאתברית בה

א'א'ס' יו יה ח ח ח יי יה ס ח ח אבגר סלה

Remain at your place in which you were created. Amen, amen, sela. YW YH *magical characters* YYYS *magical characters* ‘ B G D Sela.

This iatromagical text concludes with the first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet and *sela*. This sequence of letters immediately follows a series of divine names, formulated around the letters of the tetragrammaton, and groups of magical *kharakteres*. Both the alphabet and the *kharakteres* appear to constitute part of a larger sequence of *voces magicae* which form the conclusion to the spell. The common context in which these *voces* appear suggests that all of these elements-permutations of the tetragrammaton, the letters of the alphabet and the nonsensical *kharakteres*-are to be construed as divine names. Indeed, if in the sequence YY YH S we were to read the *samech*, not as an individual letter, but as another abbreviation, standing for *sela*, then the parallelism of the sequences *voces-kharakteres-voces-sela* and *kharakteres-alphabet-sela* would strengthen this interpretation of the letters of the alphabet as yet another form of divine name.

In TS K1.152, a paper amulet manufactured to provide protection and favour for one Shalom ibn Zuhra, we find the following invocatory phrase (line 17):

בשם אה איה אוהו אלף בית גימל

In the name of 'H 'YH 'WHW 'Aleph Beth Gimel:....

Here, the first three letters of the alphabet, invoked by their proper names, are explicitly construed as divine names in a sequence with other *voces magicae*.

Further aspects of the function of the alphabet as a divine name are revealed by the alphabetical acrostic texts. The acrostic use of the alphabet has already been observed in the text of the ostrakon from Herodion, above. There, an alphabetical acrostic is formed from a list of theophoric names ending in the element ‘־יה’. These names are reminiscent of those

attributed to angelic beings in various late antique ritual texts.¹² In the Genizah text TS K21.95 P, p.2a, lines 4-7 we find a sequence of angelic names, formed on the theophoric termination ‘־אל’, arranged in alphabetical sequence:

Abriel, Barkiel, Geliliel, Dalkiel, Hodiel, Va`diel, Ziqiel, Hanuel, Tobiel, Yehoel, Kerubiel, Lahatiel, Ma`miniel, (Nat)liel, Sodiell, (or Soriel), `Azriel, Penuel, Sefah, el, Qantotiel, Ragshiel, Shafriel, T(usm)a`el (Schäfer 1984: 143).¹³

We may also note in this regard the Genizah text TS NS 322.49 where a sequence of divine names are constructed by appending the termination ‘־יה’ to the individual letters of the alphabet:¹⁴

...יה ביה גיה דיה היה etc.

Here the letters of the alphabet themselves are explicitly construed as elements of theophoric names, clearly elucidating the principal which underlies the alphabetical catalogue of theophoric names contained in the Herodian ostrakon and the Genizah ritual texts.

The concept of sequences of divine names formed upon the basis of the letters of the alphabet was not restricted to late antique Jewish tradition. A tradition of alphabetical acrostics formed of divine names developed in (Christian) Coptic ritual texts. We may note the following examples:¹⁵

- 1- M & S no.37 (Heidelberg G 1359): A list of Biblical names with suggested translations, in roughly alphabetical order-folded and used as amulet.
- 2- M & S no.57: A healing spell which includes divine names in Greek alphabetic acrostic, the first few missing.
- 3- M & S no.135, The Praise of the Archangel Michael, (p.333): ‘I adjure you today by the 24 elders who are under your supervision, whom you established on the day when you created them from Alpha to Omega’.¹⁶

- 4- M & S no.63: The names of the 24 elders, more or less an alphabetical acrostic; ritual spell to heal and protect.
- 5- M & S no.71, (p.145): Mention is made of the 24 elders and 24 angels who stand by them. A bit further down: 'I invoke you twenty four archangels of the body of Yao Yecha.'

The above texts may lead us to observe that-in the form of an acrostic-the alphabet may represent a whole chain of divine names. But it should also be noted that this principle may be extended: that each letter in a divine name may in turn be construed-on the acrostic principle-as the first letter of yet a further divine name, which, in turn, itself consists of letters that may stand for even further divine names, and so on, in an infinite regression.

This conception is specifically attested in the thought of the second century Christian writer Marcus, as preserved in Irenaeus' *Against all Heresies* 1.13-22. Marcus describes a revelation wherein a female figure tells him of God's creation of the world through his manifesting that which is ineffable in himself by pronunciation of his own name. This name is said to be made up of four letters, clearly indicating Jewish influence on the tradition.¹⁷ Marcus' revelation proceeds to relate a series of speculations on the nature of this primordial spoken name and the manner in which it effected creation. First, the divine four-letter name is said to split into four words (of 4, 4, 10 and 12 letters respectively).¹⁸ This is suggestive of an acrostic principle – each letter of the divine name gives rise to a new word, derived from, and another version of, the divine name. In a subsequent speculation, this acrostic principle is broached directly. Creation is a reflection of the divine name. The divine name is made up of letters. But the name of each constituent letter is itself a word, in turn made up of letters, each with its own name, and so on. This reflects the complexity of the created cosmos. But its also effects an erasure of the

distinction between letters and names. Letters are names. Names are collections of letters.¹⁹

The alphabet may thus itself function as a divine name; it may embody in itself an infinite chain of divine names, as well as constituting the individual components from which divine names are constructed. Thus, it is possible to see in the writing of the alphabet, the writing of the totality of divine names. Herein lies, I believe, the explanation behind the Jewish alphabet inscriptions found in funerary contexts. The alphabet functions as a divine name, indeed the summation of all divine names. Insofar as the utterance (or inscription) of a divine name invokes the power of the divinity thus named, the presence of these alphabet inscriptions in Jewish graves invokes the presence of God to protect these burial places from disturbance.

This notion is worthy of reflection. If the letters of the alphabet can function as a divine name, any written text, a series of permutations and combinations of the letters of the alphabet, may be construed as a divine name. In such a context, all writing becomes an iteration of the divine name and thus, every act of writing becomes a ritually potent act. To write is to engage in the manipulation of the divine name and the creative power which is immanent in that name. It is interesting to ponder the implications of such a conception of the significance of written language.

Of course, the mystical stream in Rabbinic tradition takes up this notion and develops it extensively. The fetishisation of the divine name and of the written text of Scripture in general is a characteristic feature of many varieties of Rabbinic Judaism. We may recall the *merkabah* and *hekhlot* literature where manipulation of language, divine names in particular, effected ascent to the heavens by the ritual practitioner.

But obviously, not all written language was ritually efficacious – people still employed writing

for mundane purposes, still kept account books or wrote letters to one another, apparently without fear of altering the nature of the created universe by daring to place sequences of letters upon a page. There is an important point at issue here, namely that of context. The act of writing, and the written text thus produced, is only possessed of potential ritual power when situated in an appropriate context. One is drawn to recall the following observation of Levi-Strauss on things sacred:

A native thinker makes the penetrating comment that 'All sacred things must have their place.' It could even be said that being in their place is what makes them sacred for if they were taken out of their place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed. Sacred objects therefore contribute to the maintenance of order in the universe by occupying the places allocated to them.²⁰

It is this notion that J Z Smith invokes in the title of his important study of ritual, *To Take Place – Towards a Theory of Ritual* and, indeed, the English idiom, 'for an event to take place', is an embodiment of this same concept.²¹ An action is efficacious only when it occurs in the appropriate context. If the context is different, the action is different.

Jacob Neusner makes similar observations in the specific cultural context of Judaism. In his *Judaism: The evidence of the Mishnah*, Neusner writes:

'The Mishnah's evidence presents a Judaism which at its foundations and through all of its parts deals with a single fundamental question: What can man do? The evidence of the Mishnah points to a Judaism which answers that question simply: Man, like God, makes the world work. If a man wills it, all

things fall subject to that web of intangible status and incorporeal reality, with a right place for all things, each after its own kind, all bearing their proper names, described by the simple word sanctification. The world is inert and neutral. Man by his word and will initiates processes which force things to find their rightful place on one side or other of the frontier, the definitive category of holiness. This is the substance of the Judaism of Mishnah.'²²

Here we find identified at the heart of Mishnaic Judaism a generative program which encompasses the contextual use of words, and thus written language, to effect change in the world. Such a notion is clearly at work in our Late Antique Jewish alphabet inscriptions. Whether considering the grave inscriptions or the use of letters of the alphabet in texts of ritual power, it is the specific context of the use of the alphabet which imbues it with efficacious potential. Similarly, this applies to the ritual use of writing in general-context determines the potential for writing to effect transformation.

This, in turn, draws our attention to the notion of 'context' as a significant parameter in any writing system. Where a written text appears, the object it is executed upon, the materials employed, these may all convey meaning. If I sign my name on a credit card slip, I am assenting to a legal contract. If I write my name inside the cover of a book, I am asserting ownership. The written words employed are identical. The context of the writing provides the specific meaning. This is the principle which is at work in the notion of non-referential language mentioned earlier. Context is essential to the imputation of meaning, even where semantic sense may be absent. An interesting example of this phenomenon is the occurrence of so-called 'pseudo-hieroglyphs' in Roman period Egypt. These are images which emulate the pictorial

forms of hieroglyphic writing, but which are merely nonsensical pictures.²³ This lack of semantic content notwithstanding, when pseudo-hieroglyphs appear on a late Roman period coffin, these nonsensical pictures may be seen to be possessed of contextual meaning. They function vicariously as the funerary spells which in earlier periods would have been written in the same positions on the coffin in true hieroglyphs. It may be that we should speak here, not so much of the loss of knowledge of hieroglyphic writing and the empty reproduction of its pictorial forms, but rather of the continued survival of the contextual subsystem of the writing system after active knowledge of the other subsystems has begun to cease to be transmitted.

All of which brings us to a point quite some distance from where we began with a consideration of Jewish alphabet inscriptions. In review, previous study of the small group of Greek and Hebrew Jewish alphabet inscriptions which survive from the Roman period, by focussing on those occurring in funerary contexts, successfully argued that these inscriptions were unlikely to be merely scribal exercises, as all such inscriptions were usually assumed to be. Context here was the interpretative key. The same study also suggested that, like many non-Jewish alphabet inscriptions, these Jewish examples were possessed of ritual -probably apotropaic- significance. This, however, was only half an answer. By looking at some of the same evidence, and introducing other Jewish documents, I have argued that these Jewish funerary alphabet inscriptions form part of a tradition which construes the alphabet as a form of divine name. But if the alphabet is a divine name, then all written language would be rendered dangerous by the potential power inherent in the permutations and combinations of the components of the divine name embodied in any written text. How can writing continue to be practical? The answer is, again, context. The potential ritual power inherent in written language is only realised

in appropriate, culturally constructed contexts. This highlights, I have suggested, the considerable importance of the contextual dimension of any writing system. Written language which may on the surface appear devoid of sense- such as the letters of the alphabet inscribed in a Jewish catacomb-may yet be charged with contextual meaning.

Endnotes:

- 1 A. Bij de Vatte, 'Alphabet Inscriptions from Jewish Graves', *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy*, (Leiden, 1994), 148-161.
- 2 A. Dieterich, 'ABC-Denkmäler,' *Kleine Schriften*, (Leipzig and Berlin, 1911), 202-211.
- 3 Bij de Vatte, in van Henten, *et al.*, *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy*, 158-159. Bij de Vatte suggests that the Jewish alphabet inscriptions found in funerary contexts served an apotropaic function.
- 4 E. Testa, *I graffiti e gli ostraka, Herodion IV*, (Jerusalem, 1972), 77-78; Bij de Vatte, in van Henten, *et al.*, *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy*, 153.
- 5 E. Puech, 'Abécédaire et liste alphabétique de noms hébreux du début du II^e siècle A.D.,' *Révue Biblique* 87, (Jérusalem, 1980), 118-126.
- 6 Bij de Vatte, in van Henten, *et al.*, *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy*, 155.
- 7 Bij de Vatte, in van Henten, *et al.*, *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy*, 156.
- 8 A. Henrichs and K. Preisendanz, (eds.) *Papyri Graecae magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, (2nd ed). (Teubner, Stuttgart, 1973).
- 9 E. g. Hans Dieter Betz, (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells*, (2nd ed), (Chicago, 1992), 1.195-222, 1.222-31, 2.64-184, 3.494-611, 5.1-53, 19a.1-54, 36.361-71.
- 10 The best treatment of these issues is now Janowitz, see N. Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity*. (Pennsylvania, 2002).
- 11 See M. Swartz, 'Scribal Magic and its Rhetoric: Formal Patterns in Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah', *Harvard Theological Review* 83, (Cambridge, 1990), 163-180; Hekhalot Literature: P. Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, (Tübingen, 1984); *Sefer ha-Razim*: M. Margoliot, *Sefer ha-Razim, hu Sefer Keshafim mi-Tequfat ha-*

- Talmud*, (Jerusalem, 1966); Genizah: e.g. TS K1.94; TS K1.125; TS K1.127. See L. Schiffman, & M. Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah*, (Sheffield, 1992).
- 12 G. Bohak, 'Hebrew, Hebrew Everywhere?' in Scott B. Noegel, Joel Thomas Walker, Brannon M. Wheeler (eds), *Prayer, Magic and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, (Pennsylvania, 2002), 71-72.
- 13 Similar lists may be found in TS K 21.95 P, p. 2b, lines 9-11; Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* 144, TS K 21.95 T, p.1a, lines 9-11, Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*,147. This requires reading in line 9 Rahbiel and not Dahbiel and in line 10 Keluliel and not Beluliel. See J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Magic spells and formulae. Aramaic incantations of Late Antiquity*, (Jerusalem,1993),71; TS NS 322.21, p.1a, lines 1-3, Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, 153, and Bodl.Heb.a.3.25a:21-26, Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, 156..
- 14 Schiffman & Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Geniza*, 158, n.55.
- 15 The following texts are cited from Meyer & Smith, (eds), *Ancient Christian Magic*, (San Francisco, 1994).
- 16 There exists in Coptic tradition a tradition associating the 24 *presbyteroi* of the Apocalypse (Rev.4:4) with the twenty four letters of the Greek alphabet. This tradition is well attested in the iconography of Coptic art from the tenth century CE onwards. See M. Meinardus, 'The Twenty-Four Elders of the Apocalypse in the Iconography of the Coptic Church', *Studia Orientalia Christiana Collectanea* 13,(Cairo, 1968-69), 143-57
- 17 F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik and Magie*, (Leipzig, 1922), 126-133.s
- 18 The specific words concerned are not identified. The number of letters attributed to each word is probably a product of numerological speculation (e.g. 10=1+2+3+4; 12=3+3+3+3).
- 19 For discussion of Marcus' theory of language, see Janowitz, *Icons of Power:Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity*, 45-50.
- 20 C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, (Chicago, 1966), 10.
- 21 J.Z. Smith, *To Take Place. Toward Theory in Ritual*, (Chicago and London, 1987).
- 22 J. Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah*, (Chicago, 1981), 282.
- 23 On pseudo-hieroglyphs see H. Sternberg- El Hotabi, 'Der Untergang der Hieroglyphenschrift: Schriftverfall und Schrifttod im Ägypten der griechisch-römischen Zeit', *Cahiers d'Égyptologie* 69, (Paris,1994), 218-245.