

Jewish society and family tradition in funerary inscriptions

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Abstract. *The aim of this article is to present the Jewish social and family values in Antiquity, as they can be perceived mostly through a reading of the funerary inscriptions. Details regarding the care and feelings towards the deceased, as well as wishes for the potential violators of the tombs are also envisaged. The content of the epitaphs also provides precious information on the names, titles and the age of the deceased, on the causes of death, and the epithets denoting close relationships between the members of the family.*

Rezumat. *Articolul prezintă valorile sociale și familiale ale evreilor în Antichitate, așa cum se percep prin intermediul inscripțiilor funerare. Detalii privind grija și sentimentele față de cei decedați, precum și ceea ce le doresc cei rămași în viață potențialilor violatori de morminte sunt luate în discuție. Conținutul epitafurilor furnizează informații despre nume și titluri ale defuncților, despre cauzele morții, iar epitetele indică relații foarte strânse între membrii familiei.*

Keywords: Jewish family, tradition, grave epitaphs, social values, memory.

Philo of Alexandria and Josephus Flavius highlight the effort made by parents to familiarize children, from a young age, with the wisdom and the word of Torah.² According to Josephus, “(...) [o]ur principal care of all is this, to educate our children well: and we think it to be the most necessary business of our whole life to observe the laws that have been given us.”³ Private tutors emerge only starting with the 2nd century; they live in the family home and teach the children pursuant to the wisdom of Torah, although this custom was not generalized in the 1st century, when children were sent to school.

According to the Tannaitic law, a father was the main person in charge with conveying to his children the Law of Yahwe,⁴ as not only a paternal duty, but also as stated by the Deuteronomy, and as a condition for enjoying a longer life and the gift of the earth.⁵ A father also had to provide

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² Josephus, *Against Apion* II, 178: “But for our people, if anybody do but ask any one of them about our laws, he will more readily tell them all, than he will tell his own name. And this in consequence of our having learned them immediately, as soon as ever we became sensible of any thing; and of our having them, as it were, engraven on our souls. Our transgressors of them are but few: and 'tis impossible when any do offend, to escape punishment”; Philon, *Legatio ad Gaium* 210.

³ Josephus, *Against Apion* I, 60.

⁴ T. Kiddushin 1, 11: “A father’s obligation.... to teach his son Torah.”

⁵ Deuteronomy 32, 46–47; 6, 7, 11.

children with information regarding certain events, Jewish institutions or commemoration days. Often, these teachings took the shape of catechetical passages, consisting in questions and answers. There are five such passages in the Jewish Tanakh⁶ comprising the repeated formula “*when your son asks you... tell him...*” These catechetical passages bring into discussion the events related to the Exodus, to the conquest of the Earth and to the reception of the Law, all of them representing central topics of the historical faith and of the relationship with Yahweh. Most often, such catechetical passages were recited during the celebration of the newborn. First, the ritual equated with a statement of Israel as belonging to Yahweh. The first born of the Israel nation was spared when the first born of Egypt was killed. In conclusion, all those that God spared from death belong to Yahweh. Secondly, the newborn ritual represented the permanence of the relationship between Yahweh and the Jewish people: by receiving the first born, Yahweh claimed his successors implicitly, thus becoming the God of Israel “from one generation to another.” This sign of remembrance was perpetuated within the family.

It was a father’s duty to handle the circumcision of his son, to redeem him if he was the firstborn, to teach him the Torah, to find him a wife and to teach him a trade. Through circumcision and redemption, a father made his son part of Abraham’s Covenant with God and initiated him in the historical memory of the Jewish people, which began when they left from Egypt. For a child, the father must be the teacher ensuring the conveying of Jewish values and a model of moral behaviour. The duty of teaching a trade to the son has the purpose of ensuring economic independence. The daughters’ education was a mother’s task and it comprised teaching the Jewish life rules and the household chores for which Jewish women were responsible. In addition, there was much praise for a woman who used her influence in order to encourage her husband and sons to get better insight into the Torah, which she did not have to study herself, given her many duties.

In his capacity as the main person in charge with children’s education, a father was entitled to use disciplinary measures that were considered necessary: “*He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly.*”⁷ However, literature indicates a much greater number of cases when a parent’s attitude towards the children is caring and loving.⁸ Children had the duty of honouring their parents and respect them. The Talmud defines “honouring” as the obligation of ensuring parents have food, drink, clothes and locomotion means, mostly when parents grow old and need these services. The commandment addresses especially to adults, although young people are by no means exempted, and those who observe it will live a long life. In exchange, respect is a duty for children of all ages. As concluded, Talmud gives great importance to honouring the parents: “*There are three partners in every person, the Holy One Blessed be He, the father and the mother.*”

⁶ Exodus 12, 26 ; 13, 14; Joshua 4, 6 ; 4, 21–23; Deuteronomy 6, 20 –24

⁷ *Wise Saying of Solomon* 13, 24.

⁸ T.Yoma 5, 2; T.B.Yoma 30b.

*When a person honours his father and his mother, the Holy One Blessed be He says, 'I view them as though I had dwelt among them and they had honoured Me'.*⁹

Extended family represents a distinct entity that comprises one or several generations of genetically related individuals, who live under the same roof, share the same morale and religious values and are subjected to the sole authority of the family head. In case of the Jewish family, especially, it represents not only a socializing framework for the new generation of individuals, but also one for promoting traditional values and specific cultural identity.¹⁰ In a diasporic setting, where the danger of assimilation—even through mixed marriages—was real and omnipresent, Jewish family had to assert its specificity and to promote its religious traditions and purity rules. The feeling of difference and of belonging to the chosen people was cultivated since early childhood.¹¹ Concerning the relationship between children and parents, especially children and the father, the often accepted perspective is that the father had absolute power over them (*patria potestas*), including the power to decide over their life or death; however, there is only one case when the family head pronounced a sentence concerning the death of his daughter-in-law.¹² On the contrary, the Deuteronomy law limits explicitly such an interpretation of the *patria potestas* concept, by placing the power of executing a disobeying son in the hands of the Elders, after a rigorous investigation.¹³ Also, the formulas used by daughter to address their fathers may provide a clue concerning the relationships between children and the father: he was called *baal* (master) or *adon* (Sir).¹⁴ However, there are provisions attesting that, from a legal perspective, children were considered the property of the father; they even had economic values ascribed to them.

Family represented the starting point concerning socialization for each generation; such generation had to raise in its turn another generation of Jews. It is no coincidence that the main text of the Jewish Shema prayer¹⁵ reminds the Jews of the only covenant they made with the unique God and of the commandments they have to observe: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”¹⁶

Funerary epitaphs represent par excellence the means used for expressing the best feelings for the deceased members of the family, but also the harshest invocations for punishing wrongdoers, either tomb profaners or outlaws who committed a crime against someone dear when they were still alive. In some cases, we see the husband express his most profound feelings of gratitude for the

⁹ Kiddushin 30b.

¹⁰ BARCLAY 1997, 66–67.

¹¹ BARCLAY 1996, 402–413.

¹² Facerea, 38, 24.

¹³ Deuteronomy 21, 18–21.

¹⁴ DE BOER 1974, 6.

¹⁵ GUGENHEIM 1998, 726–727.

¹⁶ Deuteronomy, 6, 4–9; 11, 13–21; Numbers, 15, 37–41. GOLDENBERG 2007, 151–152.

deceased wife: “*Be brave, Julia Aemilia, aged 40. You lived a faultless life with your husband. I give thanks for your forethought and your soul.*”¹⁷ Another equally touching epitaph is dedicated to a person called Regina: “*Here is buried Regina, covered by such a tomb, which her husband set up in accordance to his love for her. After twice ten (years), she spent with him a year and four months minus eight days. She will live again and she will return to the light again. For she can hope therefore that she will rise into the age promised for the worthy and the pious, she, a true treasure, the one who deserves to have a shelter in the venerable country. Your piety has achieved this for you, your chaste life, your love for your family (?), but also the fact that you observed the Law, that you valued your marriage, whose honour was your concern. For these deeds, there is hope for you in the future, and your grieving husband finds comfort in that.*”¹⁸

The care and affection for spouses or for other family members is also suggested by other situations. First, when they were alive, through prayers and acts of charity; on such occasions, people prayed to divinity for their family members: “*Ilasios, son of Isaac, archisynagogos of Antioch, for the salvation of Photion, of his wife and his children, and for the wellbeing of Eustathia, his mother-in-law and in the memory of Isaac, of Aidesios and of Hesychion, his ancestors, he made the mosaic of the entrance. Peace and mercy on all your blessed community*”¹⁹. When they died, the others took care of the tomb belonging to the deceased: “*Flavius Iulianus, the servant. Flavia Iuliana, the daughter, for her father. Rest in peace!*”²⁰. Thirdly, the feelings of those alive could also be manifested by addressing epitaphs demonstrating appreciation and compassion. A frequent epithet in Jewish epitaphs is *benemerentus* (“the well-deserving”): “*For Plotius Fortunatus, the archisynagogos. Plotius Ampliatus, Secundinus (and) Secunda made (this monument)..., and Ofilia Basilia for her well-deserving husband*”²¹. An equally frequent epithet is *benememorius/benememoria*: “*This is the commemorative monument where Meliosa rests, the one of eternal memory, daughter of Juda and of Lady Maria*”²². Other types of epithets include “*the all shiny*”²³; “*the most respectable*”²⁴, “*the respected*”²⁵. There were also appraisals concerning the quality of life of the deceased: “*Here lies Euphrasios, archisynagogos, the one who led a good life (?)*”²⁶.

From among the second category, the one of funerary epitaphs, we can describe several very interesting situations. Two inscriptions with a similar content, but which refer to different persons, come from the necropolis of Delos, Rheneia. Only the names of the persons were replaced, namely

¹⁷ JIWE II, 326 = CIJ I, 123 (III–IV c. (?); Greek; Vigna Randanini, Rome). ZABIN 1996, 275–276.

¹⁸ JIWE II, 103 = CIJ I, 476 (III–IV C. (?); Latin; Monteverde, Rome).

¹⁹ IJO III, Syr54; RAJAK, NOY 1993, 91, no. 22; HORSLEY IV, 1979, 216, nr. 30; LIFSHITZ 1967, 40–41, nr. 39; CIJ I, 804.

²⁰ JIWE II, 290; CIJ I, 172.

²¹ JIWE I, 14 (Pl. VII); RAJAK, NOY 1993, 89, no. 5; HORSLEY 1979, 214, nr. 12.

²² JIWE I, 183 (Pl. XXVII); CIJ I, 661.

²³ IJO III, Syr26; RAJAK, NOY 1993, 90, nr. 13; HORSLEY 1979, 216, nr. 37.

²⁴ IJO II, 46; RAJAK, NOY 1993, 90, nr. 18; HORSLEY 1979, 216, nr. 24; LITSHITZ 1967, 23–24, nr. 16; CIJ I, 744.

²⁵ JIWE I, 22.

²⁶ JIWE II, 13; RAJAK, NOY 1993, 89, nr. 3; HORSLEY 1979, 214, nr. 3; CIJ, I, 336.

Heraclea²⁷ and Martina²⁸, and the end is slightly different. They comprise an invocation addressed to God Most High from a Jewish perspective, and to the angelical celestial powers, in order to revenge the coward act of murdering the two persons at a very young age, most probably by poisoning: “I invoke and I pray incessantly to the God Most High, the master of spirits and of all bodies, for those who have treacherously murdered or poisoned the wretched Heraclea, who died untimely, who have unjustly shed her innocent blood, that the same may happen to them, to those who have treacherously murdered or poisoned her and to their children. O, Lord, you who see everything and the angels of God, for whom every soul humbles itself on the present day with supplication, avenge the innocent blood, follow (them) without delay!”²⁹.

Another funerary epitaph contains a provision addressed to a potential tomb profaner, but which does not refer to a curse or threatens with a punishment the wrongdoer and his family for entire generations, as featured within similar inscriptions found in Asia Minor (especially in Phrygia and in Lydia), but it only contains an amount to be paid by the person who would move the bones to another place. “Peace upon Israel. Amen, amen, peace. Samuel. I, Aurelius Samuel, bought a memorial for myself and for my wife, Lassia Irene, whose end occurred on the 21st of October, on a Friday, in the eighth month, when Merobaudes for the second time and Saturninus were consuls. She lived 23 years, in peace. I adjure you by the victories (of those?) who rule you, I adjure you by the honours of the patriarchs, and I adjure you by the law which the Lord gave to the Jews: let no one open the memorial and put someone else’s body on top of our bones. But if anyone should open it, let him or her pay ten pounds of silver to the treasury”³⁰. Similarly, a pound of gold should have been paid by those who would have profaned the tomb of Flavia Optata, who was buried at the end of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century at Concordia, in the Iberian Peninsula³¹. However, there are epitaphs that contain harsher punishments, similar to the ones of the Anatolian area: “...Catilia Eutychi... I have made in advance (?)... In this tomb lies Hermione, the dear foster child (?) of Hermias, aged 4. I, Publius Catilius Hermias, the trader, lie here, aged 35. If anyone opens this tomb and buries someone else, he or she will pay 5,000 denarii to the treasury. And if someone either buys this tomb or erases the inscription, the wrath of God will destroy his or her whole family”³².

The role of Jewish women in the public life became increasingly important starting with the Roman period, a fact proven by numerous inscriptions. I have made here several comparisons to the epigraphic material found in the area of Asia Minor. Some of the women actually had

²⁷ IJO I, Ach70; MITCHELL 1999, 135, no. 110; WHITE 1997, 338–339, no. 3; TREBILCO 1991, 133–134, no. 4.2; VAN DER HORST 1991, 148–149, no. 6; WHITE 1987, 139–140, n. 27 and 147, n. 60; SCHÜRER 1986², 70; CIJ I, 725a; PIPPIDI 1974, 260–261; GOODENOUGH II, 1953, 61; ROBERT 1937, 81.

²⁸ IJO I, Ach71; WHITE 1997, 338–339, no. 3; TREBILCO 1991, 133–134, no. 4.2; WHITE 1987, 147, n. 60; SCHÜRER 1986², 70; CIJ I, 725b; PIPPIDI 1974, 260–261; GOODENOUGH 1953, 61; ROBERT 1937, 81.

²⁹ IJO I, Ach70.

³⁰ JIWE I, 145; HORSLEY 1979, 223, no. 114; GOODENOUGH 1953, 56; CIJ I, 594.

³¹ JIWE I, 6; CIJ I, 640.

³² JIWE II, 360; STRUBBE 1994, 126–127, no. 14; VAN DER HORST 1991, 58.

important roles within either the community or the extended urban society. Hence, during the Principate, some of the Jewish women had the title of *prostates*, “president” or “patron” of the community, for instance at Aphrodisias or of *archisynagogos*, meaning “the head of the synagogue” at Myndos and Smyrna. It was no coincidence that the number of female God fearers and proselytes also became ever more important. Some of them came from rich and influential families. Iulia Severa, the one who eventually donated an entire building for the use of the Akmonia community – probably a synagogue, given that the term used was *oikos* – or Claudia Capitolina, daughter or sister of Claudius Capitolinus Bassus, the proconsul of Asia, and the wife of a Roman senator, demonstrate the impact of Judaism in certain local social settings. In the same line, we see that the female God fearers in Pisidian Antioch were called *euschemonai*, namely “of noble descent.” However, the cases when women are mentioned explicitly on inscriptions as proselytes are scarce. At least two of them – both from Rome, in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD – made the object of my analysis because, on one hand, they reflect a practice related to the moment of reception by the community, marked by the addition of an *agnomen*, and on the other, because here the attestation of ascribing honorary titles is present, such as the one of “mother of the synagogue” (*meter synagoges*), in exchange for services brought to the community. The first example is the one of Veturia Paula (*JIWE*, II, 577 = *CIJ*, I, 523), who lived 86 years and 6 months and who was “a proselyte for 16 years under the name of Sara” and “mother of the synagogues of Campus and Volumnis,” while the second refers to “Felicitas, a proselyte for six years” (*JIWE*, II, 62 = *CIJ*, I, 462), also called Peregrina (according to Noy) or Nuemi (according to Frey). In one of the rare studies approaching the issue of matrilineal descent in ancient Judaism, (*The Origins of the Matrilineal Principle in Rabbinic Law*) after analyzing the main pagan, Christian and Rabbinic literary and legal sources regarding the status of the Jewish women, Shaye D. Cohen concludes that the passage to matrilineality in case of mixed families occurred in the 2nd century AD. According to the author, this was a result of the adaptation to the new legal conditions of Roman society, but she does not make any further observations. My point of view in this regard is that the respective measure was determined by the legislative measures adopted mainly by Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Septimius Severus concerning two main aspects. (1) The first was the interdiction of circumcising those who were not Jews. (2) The second was the limiting of proselyte actions by the Jews. By such proselytizing actions, Jews actually promoted their own socio-institutional and religious image among peoples. The fact that the interdiction of proselytizing actions would have hit hard the Judaic environment actually explains the decision of adopting the matrilineal descent principle. Furthermore, a role was also played by the influence of women on Judaism. Thus, the most plausible explanation is that women were especially targeted by the conversion to Judaism, an action that occurred without risks and without the need of circumcision, which some peoples considered self-mutilation. Moreover, ethnic belonging was most of the times hard to prove in their case. In addition, the son of a proselyte was automatically acknowledged as a Jew, reason for which he did not have to observe the rule of circumcision applied to peoples.

Abbreviations

- CIJ I = *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*, I, *Corpus of Jewish Inscriptions. Jewish Inscriptions from the IIIrd Century B.C. to the VIIth Century A.D. – Europe*, published by P. J-B. Frey, Prolegomenon by B. Lifshitz. New York, 1975².
- CIJ II = *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*, II, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum. Recueil des Inscriptions Juives qui vont du IIIe siècle avant J.-C. au VIIe siècle de notre ère – Asie-Afrique*, Città del Vaticano/Roma, 1952.
- IJO I = *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, I, *Eastern Europe*, edited by David Noy, Alexander Panayotov, and Hanswulf Bloedhorn. Tübingen, 2004.
- IJO II = *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, II, *Kleinasien*, herausgegeben von Walter Ameling. Tübingen, 2004.
- IJO III = *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, III, *Syria and Cyprus*, edited by David Noy and Hanswulf Bloedhorn. Tübingen, 2004.
- JIWE I = *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*; I, *Italy (excluding the City of Rome), Spain and Gaul*, edited by D. Noy. Cambridge. 1993.
- JIWE II = *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*; II *The City of Rome*, edited by D. Noy. Cambridge. 1995.

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