REVIEWS


The results of the excavations of Masada, carried out between 1963 and 1965, are issued in lavishly produced volumes under the aegis of the Yigael Yadin Memorial Fund. (For Masada II: The Latin and Greek Documents, see Martin Goodman's review in JJS 42 (1991), pp. 129–30.) The present tome is devoted to Hebrew and Aramaic ostraca, numbering more than seven hundred, and to the coins discovered on the site.

In preparing the edition of the inscriptions, J. Naveh has made full use of Yadin's copious preliminary notes. In addition to three very fragmentary Aramaic letters written on potsherds, the documents consist of 282 tags, bearing one or several square or archaic Hebrew characters, probably indicating the contents of the jars. The names Yehoḥanan, Yehudah and Shim'on appear on a number of the tags which are conjecturally interpreted as food-rationing tokens. Other pieces display single names and lists of names or nicknames. A particular group of these tags was identified by Yadin, over-enthusiastically perhaps, as surviving evidence of the 'lots' cast by the defenders of the fortress before their suicide, but Naveh, more wisely, prefers to leave the question open. A separate category includes inscriptions referring to contributions to priests and thus suggesting that the laws relating to tithes were, even in siege conditions, scrupulously observed. Storing jars are marked by the names of their owners, some written in Nabataean script. Other jar inscriptions indicate their contents: figs, balsam, meat, fish, etc. Several vouchers authorize the delivery of specific amounts of bread to individuals. The information supplied by the ostraca is on the whole meagre; nevertheless it is able to shed some light on the life of the garrison during the Roman siege.

In the second half of the volume, Y. Meshorer presents the list of 4,699 coins found as Masada, of which 3,914 have been successfully identified. They range from the third century B.C. (twelve Ptolemaic coins) to the early second century A.D., plus a few late Roman and Byzantine items. Nearly half of them (2,329) were struck during the First Jewish War, but the Hasmonaeans, Herod and his dynasty, as well as the Roman prefects and procurators are also well represented, respectively by 91, 395, 293 and 521 coins. It is worth observing that the entire numismatic yield of the Qumran excavations, including the treasure of 561 Tyrian silver coins, amounts to only circa 1,250 (cf. E.-M. Laperrouzaz, Qoumaran (1976), p. 149), i.e. just over a quarter of the sum total of those discovered at Masada.


There should be a warm welcome for this English translation of Lee Levine's fine study, which was originally published in Hebrew in 1985 and is now issued to a wider audience with a revised text and updated bibliography. Levine analyses the role of rabbis in Palestinian Jewish society in the third and fourth centuries A.D.
with exceptional clarity even in the treatment of very complex issues. In the process he manages to include extended quotations of a remarkable amount of primary evidence from the rabbinic texts themselves, and to acquaint readers with a wide range of pertinent archaeological material. The quite numerous illustrations of the latter material are of unusually high quality. A book which can make the study of rabbinic society accessible not just to specialists in Jewish history but also to students of late antiquity in general is much to be applauded.

This is a book which asks all the right questions. Levine wants to know how the rabbis saw themselves, how they were perceived by others, to what extent they were able to exercise authority. The methodological problems in tackling such issues are horrendous, as Levine shows himself aware (pp. 16–23). Any attempt to grasp the 'uniqueness of the sages' (pp. 47–52) depends in the end on a fine judgement about what the rabbinic texts represent. At the one extreme they can be taken as the solipsistic self-communing of a self-selected group of religious enthusiasts whose image of the outside world was too distorted by their own values to bear much relation to reality; at the other extreme, the same text can be taken as a political and social history of late antique Jewish society, in which struggles for power may sometimes be expressed obliquely in terms of disputes over obscure (to us) halacha. Levine portrays himself as in moderate opposition to this latter view, which he stigmatises as 'romantic' (p. 21), but on occasion he comes close to it himself despite his best intentions.

In spite of his extensive reference to archaeological material as illustration of his points, Levine's argument depends almost entirely on the rabbinic texts alone. It is thus in the discussion of rabbinic attitudes to their own lives and values that his analysis is at its best (e.g. pp. 43–7 on attitudes to Torah study; pp. 55–9 ff. on the social support systems of rabbis). Among the attempts to reach out beyond the rabbis' own mentality, his greatest success lies in the analysis of terms and specific cases rather than the quotation of general statements. Thus the analysis of the actions said to have been taken by rabbis (pp. 101–5) and the terms used to describe the issuing of decisions to a non-rabbinic public (pp. 128–33) are instructive. So too is the computation of the (minimal) number of sages said to have been teaching throughout the period under discussion (pp. 66–9) and the revelation that modern assertions of a countrywide rabbinic sanhedrin in amoraic Palestine are based on no evidence whatsoever.

Problems begin to arise when the discussion rather surprisingly starts to assume the sort of rabbinic influence over non-rabbinic Jewish society which the whole study was intended to investigate. In a way the word 'class' was an unfortunate choice from the beginning since it already presupposes too much about rabbis. Levine's defence of the term on p. 14 is uncharacteristically confused. Nor is the term 'elie', which crops up often, much to be preferred. Both reflect Levine's predisposition to take for granted that rabbis had an important role in wider Jewish society. The result is a tendency sometimes to read too much and at other times to read too little into rabbinic dicta. Rabbinic sources explain the move of R. Judah haNasi from Beth Shearim to Sepphoris by reference to his health requirements; Levine postulates political advantages through closer contact with the Roman administration (pp. 36–7). A talmudic text invokes a violent death on those rabbis who 'sit separately and study Torah' (bBerachot 63b); Levine interprets this to mean that such a person is 'in a trying position socially' (p. 97). Conversely, the ruling by R. Elazar b. Pedat that 'it is permissible to stab an 'am ha-aretz on the Day of Atonement that falls on the Sabbath' (bPesahim 49b) is taken entirely seriously as evidence that he detested...
the 'ammei ha-aretz 'and no doubt (?) was no less hated by them' (p. 115); Levine does not tackle the difficult problem of how to spot a joke in the Talmud.

For such issues the archaeological evidence ought to provide some counterweight to the rabbinic view, but Levine rarely uses it for such a purpose. The disposition of burials at Beth Shearim and the language used on the funerary inscriptions is said by Levine to show that rabbis were separate from the rest of Jewish society (pp. 49–50), but the significance of such separation in the light of contemporary burial practices is left curiously unexplored and the discussion immediately reverts to the rabbinic texts. Nor is the result much more convincing when text and archaeology are viewed in tandem. I am not convinced that the word רענא on an inscription from Dura Europus is relevant to the question whether the 'ammei ha-aretz can be said to have attended their own synagogues; Levine points out that R. Ishmael b. Elazar objected to the use of רענא to mean רעניא and that he claimed that this was the usage of the 'ammei ha-aretz (p. 114), but how many others followed the same linguistic practice cannot be known.

All these are questions of method which apply throughout the book, but they affect only details. Where Levine may provoke more serious disagreement is in his picture of the patriarch’s relations with the rabbis, which is the subject of Chapter 4. This picture is heavily dependent on Levine’s earlier study on the patriarch, which was published in 1979. According to that, the patriarch was a powerful political figure in close contact with the Roman government. Faced with the discrepancy between that picture and the account in this book of the political powerlessness of the rabbis, he simply postulates an almost total divorce between patriarch and sages (pp. 42, 134–91), such that the patriarch’s influence should be seen as quite different from, and sometimes even in opposition to, that of the sages. For this the evidence lies in stories of occasional quarrels between individual nesiim and individual rabbis. But I cannot see how such quarrels differ from those between rabbis. To imply that R. Judah haNasi, the compiler of the Mishnah, was not seen first and foremost as a rabbinic sage seems to me perverse.

The easiest solution is to downgrade the extent of the political power of third-century nesiim, which is precluded neither by rabbinic influences to meetings between patriarchs and individual Romans (p. 135) nor by the remarks of Origen about the ethnarch’s informal power (p. 137). This has the advantage that it makes better sense in the context of the exercise of informal power elsewhere in the Roman Empire in this period. Elsewhere in the book also a rather keener sensitivity to the state of the rest of the Roman world would have been an advantage. It is dubious whether the relationship between rabbis and patriarchs can usefully be compared with the highly developed institution of patronage found in aristocratic society in the city of Rome (contra p. 139). It is unlikely that the administrative changes in the Palestine region in the early empire really amounted to urbanization (contra p. 25). It is a fact worth pondering (but not pondered by Levine) that all the Palestinian rabbis he discusses were after A.D. 212 Roman citizens and could have thought of themselves as Roman.

All these comments should be taken as a recognition not primarily of faults in the book reviewed but of the complexity of the material studied and the desirability of continuing work towards a full understanding of the social, economic and political life of late antique rabbis. Lee Levine’s book has the great merit that by its stimulating presentation and wide compass it will encourage its readers to see what can be done and to embark on the search for further enlightenment.

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