

A JEWISH ARAMAIC (OR HEBREW) *LAISSEZ-PASSER* FROM THE EGYPTIAN PORT OF BERENIKE*

RICHARD C. STEINER, *Yeshiva University, New York*

At the time of the Jewish revolt against Rome in 70 C.E., Egypt was the *hormos* . . . *tēs Indikēs* “port for India,” i.e., the port used by the Romans for trade with India (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.16.5 §385).¹ Much light has been shed on that description by the ongoing excavations at Berenike, the Egyptian Red Sea port that handled most of the India trade at the time. Indian products and pottery and even a Tamil-Brāhmi inscription have been found there.² Palmyrene interest in this lucrative enterprise is reflected by the Palmyrene Aramaic inscription(s) discovered in the excavations.³

Another intriguing inscription from that site is in Jewish square letters, incised on a sherd found in a trash dump during the 1998 season of excavations.⁴ In the report of that season’s excavations, P. C. Schmitz published the following reading of “Hebrew graffiti 6019-a-3”:⁵

1. TRR
2. [M]ᶜKR

According to him:

This inscribed sherd attests to Jewish merchants who visited Berenike or possibly resided there. Additional evidence of Jews at Berenike derives from two Greek jar labels discovered in the last two

* This article has benefited greatly from the generous assistance of Louis H. Feldman, Roberta Tomber, Ada Yardeni, and Steven Sidebotham; however, they are not responsible for its contents.

¹ The comment on this passage in G. Cornfeld, ed., *Josephus: The Jewish War* (Givatayim, Israel, 1982), p. 182, n. 385a, implies that the clause “that is the port for India” modifies “Arabia Felix,” but this is a misreading of the text. I am indebted to L. H. Feldman for confirming this for me.

² I. Mahadevan, “Tamil-Brāhmi Graffito,” in S. E. Sidebotham and W. Z. Wendrich, eds., *Berenike 1995: Preliminary Report of the 1995 Excavations at Berenike (Egyptian Red Sea Coast) and the Survey of the Eastern Desert* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 205–8; S. E. Sidebotham and W. Z. Wendrich, “Interpretive Summary and Conclusion,” in S. E. Sidebotham and W. Z. Wendrich, eds., *Berenike 1998: Report of the 1998 Excavations at Berenike and the Survey of the Egyptian*

Eastern Desert, including Excavations in Wadi Kala-lat (Leiden, 2000), pp. 418–19.

³ M. Dijkstra and A. M. F. W. Verhoogt, “The Greek-Palmyrene Inscription,” in S. E. Sidebotham and W. Z. Wendrich, eds., *Berenike 1997: Report of the 1997 Excavations at Berenike and the Survey of the Egyptian Eastern Desert, including Excavations at Shenshef* (Leiden, 1999), pp. 207–18; P. C. Schmitz, “Semitic Graffiti,” in *Berenike 1998*, pp. 186–89. By the third century C.E., the Palmyrenes had garrisons and trading posts in Egypt in an attempt to control the India trade; see Dijkstra and Verhoogt, “Greek-Palmyrene Inscription,” p. 215. The Palmyrenes and Indians were active in South Arabia too in this period. An Old South Arabian inscription from al-ʿUqlah mentions legations that Ilʿadd Yaliṭ, king of Hadramawt (third century C.E.) received at his resort there, including *tdmryyhn* “two Palmyrenes” and *hndyyhn* “two Indians.” I have argued elsewhere that these visits were connected with the frankincense trade; see my *The Case for Fricative-Laterals in Proto-Semitic* (New Haven, Conn., 1977), pp. 138–40.

⁴ Schmitz, “Semitic Graffiti,” pp. 183–86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

seasons of excavations. One, excavated in 1998, reads *tryphenai ioudaikon* (perhaps to be interpreted “Jewish delicacies”; C. Helms, personal communication, May 5, 1999). A second label (excavated in 1997) reads *ioudaik[]*, certainly to be translated “Jewish” (Helms, personal communication, May 5, 1999).⁶

Let us begin with line 2. Schmitz writes:

In line 2, the word . . . [M]ʿKR can be interpreted as a Hebrew lexeme. . . . The verb . . . ʿKR is found in Hebrew, Phoenician, and Aramaic with the meaning ‘to rile’ or ‘to disturb’ in both literal and metaphoric senses. . . . If derived from the simple stem, the verbal noun *mʿkr* would be agentive: “one who disturbs”; if passive, patientive “disturbed (one).” Alternately, *m-* could be a preposition preceding the participle, meaning “from one who disturbs.”⁷

Schmitz is uncertain about the reading of one of the letters in line 2:

The second letter of line 2 might be read as \beth /B (Heb. *bet*), but again I consider this reading less likely. Hebrew *bet* is most often produced with a horizontal base line extending up to about a third of its length to the right of the vertical stroke. The horizontal stroke of the letter in question crosses the vertical but does not extend to the right. The photograph of the inscription published herewith became available to me only after this article was completed. The slide image on which I based my reading did not clearly show the rightward extension of the horizontal base stroke of the letter I read as *kap*. The improved image may support a reading of the letter as *bet*, but further consideration is in order. If the reading *bet* is followed, the word is a verbal noun derived from the common word for motion ʿBR, ‘to pass.’⁸

The photograph and the copy published with the article show that the sign is indeed *bet*. They also show that there is no need for brackets around the first letter of *mʿbr*, since the left portion of the *mem* is preserved. The right portion of the *mem* was lost when the lower right corner of the sherd was broken off along a diagonal line. Were there additional breaks? The reconstructions offered below assume that the vertical left edge of the sherd is the result of a break that caused loss of text at the end of lines 1 and 2, but this is only a conjecture.

It is uncertain what Schmitz means in calling *mʿbr* a “verbal noun.” The uncertainty arises from his assertion, a few lines later, that “if derived from the simple stem, the verbal noun *mʿkr* would be agentive: ‘one who disturbs’; if passive, patientive ‘disturbed (one)’”—a statement I find incomprehensible. In any event, the meaning of the word—and the function of the text—is clarified by the following description of the Greek ostraca found at Berenike:

The vast majority are short orders to let goods pass . . . using the *aorist* imperatives of *παρήμι* (*πάρες* and *πάρετε*) ‘let pass’ to clear various commodities through a customs gate (*πύλη*).⁹

It seems very likely that the Jewish text had a similar function. Even in modern Hebrew, the word for a pass (i.e., a *laissez-passer*) is *teʿudat maʿavar*, lit., “document of passage.” Perhaps the text originally read *tn mʿbr* “grant passage, let pass.” The earliest attestation

⁶ Ibid., p. 186. But cf. R. S. Bagnall, C. C. Helms, and A. M. F. W. Verhoogt, *Documents from Berenike*, vol. 1, *Greek Ostraka from the 1996–1998 Seasons* (Brussels, 2000), p. 70: “The *ιουδαϊκόν* . . . could be a liquid measure, attested elsewhere (but only later) as a ‘Jewish’ sextarius. . . .”

⁷ Schmitz, “Semitic Graffiti,” pp. 183–84.

⁸ Ibid., p. 183.

⁹ R. S. Bagnall, C. C. Helms, and A. M. F. W. Verhoogt, “The Ostraka,” in *Berenike 1997*, p. 201. See also idem, *Documents*, p. 9.

of *ntn m'br* in *Ma'agarim* (the CD-ROM of the Historical Dictionary Project of the Academy of the Hebrew Language in Israel) is from Yosippon, the tenth-century Byzantine Hebrew version of Josephus's *War*: *hry hšlg 'šr l' ntnw m'br lkl 'dm ky 'm lrwmyym* "the snowy mountains that did not let anyone pass except for the Romans."¹⁰ There is no reason to doubt that the phrase could have been used earlier, for it is based on Biblical Hebrew *ntn (l)'br* "let pass" (Num. 20:21, 21:23, Judg. 3:28), where *ntn* governs the infinitive (*l'*)*br* instead of the verbal noun *m'br*.

Until now we have accepted Schmitz's assumption that our text is a "Hebrew graffito." The time, place, and function of the inscription, however, would seem to justify an attempt to read it as Aramaic. The form *m'br* certainly lends itself quite naturally to such a reading, since it is the normal infinitive of *'br* in that language. The broken *m* may have been preceded by the preposition *l-*, but the latter is not obligatory.¹¹ Following the Greek, we might reconstruct a text such as [*šbwq l*] *m'br* with the meaning "allow to pass, let pass"; cf. Targ. Onqelos to Deut. 2:30 *lmšbqn' lmy'ybr* "to allow us to pass" and to Num. 20:21, 21:23; Targ. Jonathan to Judg. 3:28 *wl' šbqw 'nš lm'br* "and they did not allow anyone to pass"; etc.

If this reconstruction is correct, it would seem to shed light on the date of the inscription. The examples given above of *šbq* governing an infinitive come from targums written in Standard Literary Aramaic and reflect the heritage of Official Aramaic. Thus, in the Achaemenid period, we find *l' šbqn ln lmbnyh* "they do not allow us to build it."¹² In Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine period, however, the syntax of *šbq* undergoes a change, and we find *šbq* governing a participle or a finite verb clause introduced by *d-* "that." Thus, Targum Neofiti has *lmšbq yt ysr'l 'bryn* "to let Israel pass" at Num. 20:21 and *wl' šbq syhn yt ysr'l 'bryn* "but Sihon did not let Israel pass" at Num. 21:23.¹³ It is true that examples of the older construction can be found in Genizah fragments of the Palestinian Targum,¹⁴ but these are probably to be attributed to the syntax of the Hebrew *Vorlage*. Thus, if the inscription originally read *šbwq (l)m'br*, it is probably pre-Byzantine.

The Greek *παρίημι* passes found at Berenike may provide further evidence for the date of our inscription. Those texts belong to the third quarter of the first century C.E.¹⁵ Moreover, customs receipts found elsewhere in Egypt indicate that a change occurred in the first quarter of the second century C.E. From 18–113 C.E., the receipts always contain the

¹⁰ This phrase is from the same speech as the phrase "port for India." Unfortunately, there does not seem to be an exact Greek equivalent in Josephus.

¹¹ For the optional omission of *l-* before infinitives in Galilean Aramaic, see W. B. Stevenson, *Grammar of Palestinian Jewish Aramaic* (Oxford, 1924), p. 53; A. Tal, "The Infinitive and Its Forms in the Strata of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic" (Hebrew), in M. Bar-Asher et al., eds., *Mehqere lašon muggašim le-Ze'ev Ben-Hayyim* (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 207; J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls* (Jerusalem, 1985), p. 33. For the omission in Egyptian Aramaic, see J. M. Lindenberger, *The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar* (Baltimore, 1983), p. 111; R. C. Steiner and C. F. Nims, "Ashurbanipal and Shamash-shum-ukin: A Tale of Two Brothers from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *Revue Biblique* 92 (1985): 78 (XXI/5).

¹² B. Porten and A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* (Jerusalem, 1986–), vol. 1, p. 68, A4.7 Cowley 30, l. 23.

¹³ *The Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch: Codex Vatican (Neofiti 1)* (Jerusalem, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 312, 315. Cf. M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (Ramat-Gan, 1990), pp. 536–37: *šwbqy dny'wl* "allow me to go in" and *wl' šbqyh 'bd* "and he did not let him do." Cf. also Peshitta to Num. 21:23 *wl' šbq syhwn l'ysr'yl dn'br* and Judg. 3:28 *wl' šbqw l'nš dn'br* contrasting with Peshitta to Num. 20:21 *lmšbq lbny 'ysr'yl lm'br* "to allow the Israelites to pass."

¹⁴ See Sokoloff, *Dictionary*, p. 536.

¹⁵ Bagnall, Helms, and Verhoogt, *Documents*, pp. 7, 10.

verb *παρίημι*; in 114 C.E., a new standard formula is introduced without that verb, possibly reflecting a change in the customs process.¹⁶ The latest *παρίημι* passes found outside of Berenike are from 142–47 C.E.¹⁷ If our Jewish inscription was modeled after these passes, it probably comes from the late first century or early second century C.E.

In the Greek ostraca from Berenike, the first line normally contains the name of the sender or the addressee or both.¹⁸ The same may be true of our Jewish inscription. I suggest the reading *trd[ywn]*.¹⁹ It is clear that this name was in use in the early second century C.E. because R. Hanania b. Tradion (better: Tardion)²⁰ was executed by the Romans towards the end of Hadrian's reign (117–38 C.E.). In Rabbinic literature we also find mention of an Eleazar b. Tardion (y. Git. 7. 2) and an Isaac b. Tardion (Midr. Tehillim 31. 6), but their dates are uncertain.

What about the paleographic evidence? Schmitz, who bases his dating on the work of A. Yardeni, concludes that “the letter forms of this sherd admit a paleographic date between the second and the sixth century AD.”²¹ According to Yardeni herself, the late first century should not be excluded from consideration:

It is difficult to determine the date of this text paleographically. I don't know of ostraca incised with a square Hebrew script in the first century, but there are of course many ossuaries from this period displaying a large variety of incised letter forms in the square Hebrew script. The use of ostraca would fit the period, and if it was found in an archaeological context of the late 1st century, this date shouldn't be ruled out.²²

A number of other sherds have been found at Berenike bearing incised inscriptions in various scripts: Aramaic, Latin, Greek, and Tamil-Brāhmi.²³ Most of these graffiti have not been assigned a date, but the Tamil-Brāhmi inscription has been dated to the first century C.E. based on several independent pieces of evidence, including pottery from the same locus dated to 60–70 C.E.²⁴

The evidence we have considered thus far points to a date in the late first century or early second century C.E. Other evidence points to a later date: “Associated pottery dates from the late fourth to fifth century AD.”²⁵ It must be kept in mind, however, that both the Jewish pass and the Greek passes were found in trash dumps and that “it was customary that dung heaps and refuse dumps were frequently rummaged.”²⁶ Roberta Tomber, the pottery specialist of the Berenike excavations, writes:

Trench 21 was primarily fifth century in date, and in comparison to many of the trenches was fairly homogeneous. However, at Berenike we do tend to get residual material mixed into the late deposit and this may be the explanation for your graffiti sherd.²⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 37–64.

¹⁹ In Yardeni's view, “*Taw Resh Dalet* seems plausible” (personal communication, 8 November 2002).

²⁰ For this and other vocalizations of *trdywn* in vocalized manuscripts of the Mishnah, see M. Bar-Asher, *Peraqim be-masoret lešon ḥakhamim šel yehude Iṭal-yah* (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 65, 92.

²¹ Schmitz, “Semitic Graffiti,” p. 184.

²² Personal communication, 8 November 2002.

²³ Schmitz, “Semitic Graffiti,” pp. 186–89; A. M. F. W. Verhoogt, “Greek and Latin Texts,” in *Berenike 1995*, pp. 200–201; Mahadevan, “Tamil-Brāhmi Graffiti,” pp. 205–8.

²⁴ Mahadevan, “Tamil-Brāhmi Graffiti,” pp. 205–6.

²⁵ Schmitz, “Semitic Graffiti,” p. 183.

²⁶ J. C. Greenfield and A. Shaffer, “*Qlqltʿ, Tubkinnu*, Refuse Tips and Treasure Trove,” *Anatolian Studies* 33 (1983): 127.

²⁷ Personal communication, 21 November 2002.

We may now offer the following very tentative alternate reconstructions of the text:

Hebrew:

<i>trd</i> [<i>ywn tn</i>]	Tard[ion. Grant]
<i>m^cbr</i> [l-PN]	passage [to PN].

Jewish Aramaic:

<i>trd</i> [<i>ywn šbwq</i> l-PN]	Tard[ion. Let PN]
<i>m^cbr</i> / [l] <i>m^cbr</i> [. . .]	pass [. . .]

Trd[*ywn*] would seem to be the name of the addressee, appearing here in the vocative. Note that the syntactic function of [l-PN] in the reconstructed Aramaic text is different from that in the reconstructed Hebrew text. In the Aramaic text, [l-PN] is the direct object and properly belongs after *šbwq* “let” at the end of line 1. That word order, however, creates an imbalance between lines 1 and 2, unless we assume that several words were lost after *m^cbr*.

If this interpretation is correct, the analogy of the Greek texts would seem to raise a question about Schmitz’s conclusion that “this inscribed sherd attests to Jewish merchants who visited Berenike or possibly resided there.” The Greek orders to let pass were normally between customs officials, not merchants.²⁸ If so, perhaps the same was true of our Jewish inscription. On the other hand, one of the Greek texts begins “Ploutarchos son of Ammonios, trader” or possibly “Ploutarchos to Ammonios, trader.”²⁹ According to the editors:

Unfortunately the syntax . . . is by no means clear. It would appear at first glance that it is the merchant who is giving the order to let pass some goods, but it is not apparent how a merchant would have the authority to give such instructions. If the merchant is the recipient of the order, however, matters are even less clear, as the recipients in all other cases where they can be identified hold official positions.³⁰

One hopes that future finds at Berenike will shed further light on the role of merchants and the role of Jews in the customs process. But whether our Jewish text was a communication between Jewish customs officials or Jewish merchants, it is clear that some Jews had firsthand knowledge of Egypt’s role as the “port for India.”

²⁸ Bagnall, Helms, and Verhoogt, *Documents*, p. 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65 (text no. 94).