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. 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. 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.

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 Ostracon 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 Ostracon 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;
3- An Ostracon, 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 ‘hy-’, which form an acrostic on the letters of the alphabet from aleph to samech;
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.’ (Trans. adapted);
5- A similar recipe reads: ‘If you want an enemy never to attack you or to do anything against