

Jewish identity and language in Roman Caesarea

Caesarea, the capital and economic centre of the Roman province Judaea-Palaestina, was a diverse city. No single group constituted a majority; rather, sizable groups of Greeks, Jews, Roman military veterans and their descendants, Samaritans, and eventually Christians lived side by side. This diversity is also reflected linguistically, with Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin all represented at Caesarea and throughout the province. I propose to focus on one of these groups and analyse the relationship between Jewish identity and language at Caesarea, focusing on the 3rd-6th centuries CE.

As recent research has recognised, Jewish identity in Roman antiquity was complex, both naturalising elements of Graeco-Roman culture but also defining itself against it.¹ Linguistically, Aramaic and especially Hebrew were sometimes used as distinct markers of identity. For example, the move in the second Jewish revolt against the Romans (132-136 CE) to mint coins in Paleo-Hebrew script and Hebrew language has been commonly regarded as ‘proto-nationalist’.² The wide production of rabbinic literature in Hebrew and Aramaic under Roman rule, meanwhile, has few parallels, and takes countercultural currents also seen in the Greek Second Sophistic one step further.³

However, Greek is also prominent among the Jews of Roman Judaea-Palaestina.⁴ Caesarean Jews, in fact, are typically characterised as the most ‘Hellenised’ Jews of the province - a characterisation that has antecedents in Jewish discourses of antiquity. For example, Caesarea is identified as the opposite of Jerusalem, the Jewish city par excellence, and as a daughter of the Jews’ ancient enemy Edom (a common code for Rome).⁵

How, then, do the many Jews living in this Roman ‘Anti-Jerusalem’ negotiate their identities in a highly multilingual context? Incorporating evidence from inscriptions, Greek-language literature, and Aramaic/Hebrew rabbinic texts, I propose to dissect the complex relationship between language and identity for Jews at Caesarea.⁶

I shall argue that the Jews of Caesarea do indeed give Greek a prominence that stands out among the Jewish communities of Judaea-Palaestina. There are no hints that it was considered a ‘non-Jewish language’; rather, we can see Caesarean Jews considering it highly prestigious, and even using it in the synagogue – the space where their Jewish identity is most salient. The most famous Caesarean rabbi, Abbahu, further uses Greek puns to justify his interpretations of Jewish law.

We cannot, however, simply categorise the Jews of Caesarea as part of the Greek-speaking world and move on. Aramaic and Hebrew also have an important presence. The Caesarean rabbis are presented as deeply embedded in a wider Jewish culture that prized and required profound knowledge of these two Semitic languages, and they apparently mastered them. Hebrew also retained some symbolic value as a marker of identity for the wider Jewish community in Caesarea. Greek-speaking Gentiles, meanwhile, associate the Jews with Aramaic and Hebrew even as they converse with them in Greek. Notably, finally, Latin is prominent at Caesarea until the 4th century CE, but we do not find any evidence for Jewish use of Latin, a phenomenon I shall explain.

¹ See e.g. Schwartz, S. (2009) *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* Princeton University Press; Lapin, H. (2012) *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100-400 CE.* Oxford University Press; Rosen-Zwi, I. (2017) ‘Rabbis and Romanization: A Review Essay’, in Popovic M. *et al.* (eds.), *Jewish Cultural Encounters in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern World*, Brill, pp. 218-245.

² e.g. Rosén, H.B. (1982) ‘Die Sprachsituation im römischen Palästina’, in Rosén H.B. *East and West: selected writings in linguistics / Part I, General and Indo-European linguistics*, W. Fink, pp. 489-512 (a reprint of an article originally published in 1980).

³ Lapin, H. *op. cit.*

⁴ See above all Lieberman, S. (1994) *Greek in Jewish Palestine/Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, Jewish Theological Seminary of America (a combined reprint of two works originally published in 1942 and 1950).

⁵ *bMegillah*, 6a.

⁶ My research is above all made possible by the recent comprehensive collection of inscriptions from Caesarea in Ameling W. *et al.* (eds.), (2011) *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaea-Palaestinae. Volume II. Caesarea and the Middle Coast. 1121-2160.* De Gruyter.