

# Prayer in the Ancient World

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*in Three Volumes*

Preview

GENERAL EDITORS:  
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BRILL





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*Prayer in the Ancient World* (PAW) is an innovative resource on prayer in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean. This online resource, which is also forthcoming in print as a multivolume set, begins with a scholarly yet accessible introduction to the study of ancient prayer and praying practices written by the general editors. Overseen by a team of expert area editors who provide overviews of each section, the over 350 entries in PAW showcase a robust selection of the range of different types of prayers attested from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, the Levant, early Judaism and Christianity, Greece, Rome, Arabia, and Iran, enhanced by critical commentary. The project features unique metadata and tagging apparatuses to facilitate comparison and analysis of cross-cultural phenomena related to prayer in unprecedented new ways. PAW thus provides a sweeping and cross-culturally representative collection of data that will encourage scholars to explore the historical development and impact of prayer in pioneering ways far into the future.

Allowing each tradition to speak for itself, while simultaneously highlighting similarities across languages and traditions, the project conceives of prayer in a broad and expansive way. In contrast to a typical anthology, PAW does not limit itself only to the “usual suspects” or “canonical” lists of prayers long considered the essential examples, but instead illustrates the variety of ways human beings have sought to communicate with or influence beings with extraordinary superhuman power for millennia. The project invites readers to encounter new materials and decide for themselves whether and how these disparate practices relate to each other. By including diverse examples such as vows and oaths, blessings, curses, incantations, graffiti, iconography, and more, PAW casts a wide net. In so doing, PAW privileges no particular tradition or conception of how to interact with the divine; for example, the project refuses to perpetuate a value distinction between “prayer,” “magic,” and “cursing.”

PAW is designed to enable readers to not only deepen their understanding of prayers within their own field of interest, but also to discover connections across cultures. Detailed overviews introduce each area and address key issues such as language and terminology, geographical distribution, materiality, orality, phenomenology of prayer, prayer and magic, blessings and curses, and ritual settings and ritual actors. In order to be as comprehensive as practically possible, the volume includes a representative prayer of every attested type from each tradition.

Individual entries include a wealth of information. Each begins with a list of essential details, including the source, region, date, occasion, type and function, performers, and materiality of the prayer. Next, after a concise summary and a brief synopsis of the main textual witnesses, a formal description calls attention to the exemplar’s literary and stylistic features, rhetorical structure, important motifs, and terminology. The occasions when the prayer was used and its function are analyzed, followed by a discussion of how this exemplar fits within the range of variation of this type of prayer practice, both synchronically and diachronically. Important features of the prayer relevant for cross-cultural comparison are foregrounded in the subsequent section. Following an up-to-date translation, a concise yet detailed commentary provides explanations necessary for understanding the prayer and its function. Finally, each entry concludes with a bibliography of essential primary and secondary resources for further study.

How similar were the types of religious technology in different cultures, and where would one find examples to compare? Scholars working on religion recognize the value of cross-cultural comparison, yet it is often difficult in practice, as each tradition requires mastery of its own languages, primary texts, specialized terminology and taxonomies, and body of secondary

scholarship. By bringing prayers from a range of ancient traditions together in an accessible form, PAW provides a bank of data that will allow comparison of prayers across traditions on a revolutionary scale. Moreover, the online version of PAW provides uniquely powerful technical search tools.

The attempt to communicate with the supernatural is at the heart of religious practice and experience. PAW brings prayer back to the center of scholarly investigation and invites scholars and students to encounter anew this often understudied aspect of religion.

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## Contents of this Preview

This preview provides an overview of the scope and approach of PAW as an innovative research tool. An extensive table of contents showcases the rich variety of prayer phenomena treated in PAW. Plans continue for additional prayers and sections. A list of contributors exhibits the large number of international experts participating in PAW. Two sample entries of different types of prayers illustrate the high level of scholarly expertise throughout the volumes, the structure and content of entries, and the diverse areas of interest relevant to the project.

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Daniel K. Falk and Rodney A. Werline, General Editors  
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**Note:** The project also plans to treat prayer and related phenomena from other religions traditions where surviving evidence is scarce or indirect, including:

- Etruscan (*Liber Linteus Zagrabensis*)
- Pre-Christian Gaulish (Lezoux lamella with prayer for vengeance; Chamalières inscription)
- Old Norse (Runic amulets and inscriptions)
- Palmyrene (Hoq cave graffiti inscription)

Other plans include excursions on evidence from iconography, votives, and names.

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# King Assurbanipal's Prayer to the Goddess Mullissu

*Jamie Novotny*

Region:	Mesopotamia > Assyria
Date:	7th century BCE
Time/Occasion:	Temple building; Perpetual
Type/Function:	Petition > for well-being > ruler Dedication > structure
Performers:	King*
Mode of recitation:	Unknown
Place/Space:	Temple
Materiality:	Building materials > paving slabs

## Description

An inscription of Assyria's last great king, Assurbanipal (r. 668–c. 631 BCE), written in the Standard Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, contains a short prayer to the patron goddess of the city Nineveh, Mullissu (who is also known as Ishtar of Nineveh). The king petitions Mullissu to grant him happiness and a long life since he had enlarged the courtyard of her temple Emašmaš (“House in Which Divination Is Performed”).

## Witnesses

This text, which is generally referred to as the “Mullissu Inscription” in scholarly publications, was inscribed on numerous rectangular-shaped limestone slabs that were found in and around the ruins of the Mullissu temple at Nineveh, which is located near the center of the citadel, south of Assurbanipal's palace (“House of Succession”) and Ezida (“True House”; the temple of the god of scribes, Nabû) and north of the palace of Assurbanipal's grandfather, Sennacherib (“Palace Without A Rival”). These slabs were used to pave the entire courtyard of the Emašmaš. To date, only fourteen copies of the inscription have been published, although many more copies existed in antiquity (see below). The known exemplars are now in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (Birmingham), the British Museum (London), the de Liagre Böhl Collection of the Netherlands Institute for the Near East (Leiden), the Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (Brussels), and the Vorderasiatisches Museum (Berlin); seven of the fourteen slabs are in the British Museum. Numerous limestone fragments engraved with this text still litter the surface of Kuyunjik, the citadel mound of Nineveh, and attest to the mass production of this text in the mid-seventh century BCE, during the third decade of Assurbanipal's reign.

## Formal Description

The Mullissu Inscription is a ninety-four-word long Akkadian text that is engraved/carved on limestone paving stones in seventeen to twenty lines. This short composition is generally classified by scholars as a dedicatory inscription since it is dedicated to the goddess Mullissu, the divine patron of Nineveh, the principal administrative center of Assurbanipal, the king of Assyria in whose name the text was written. The inscription can be roughly divided into four sections. These are:

- 1 Dedication to Mullissu (six words);
- 2 Presentation of Assurbanipal (fifty-four words);
- 3 Building Report/Main Topic (twelve words); and
- 4 Concluding Prayer (twenty-two words).

Like other Assyrian dedicatory inscriptions written on building materials built into the physical structure of temples and shrines, this text contains a brief opening dedication. Unlike (shorter) dedicatory texts

written on baked mud bricks, stone blocks, and door sockets, this inscription refers to the king's successes on the battlefield (exclusively the defeat of rulers of the kingdom of Elam in modern day Iran). Assurbanipal directly credits his victories over Teumman, Ummanigaš (Ḫumban-nikaš II), Tammarītu, Pa'ê, (and) Ummanaldašu (Ḫumban-ḫaltaš III) to Mullissu, whose alter ego, Ishtar, is the goddess of war (as well as love). In gratitude for her support in battle, he had the courtyard of her temple at Nineveh—Emašmaš, whose ancient Sumerian name means “House in Which Divination Is Performed”—enlarged and paved with inscribed limestone slabs; this is the main topic of the text. Unlike many shorter Assyrian dedicatory texts written on other parts of temples—specifically, bricks and door sockets—the Mullissu Inscription ends with a prayer petitioning the goddess to grant long life and happiness to Assurbanipal; such petitions are common in longer texts inscribed on clay cylinders and multi-faceted clay prisms deposited in the brick superstructure of temples, palaces, and city walls.

## Occasion and Function

The text, with its concluding prayer, was written to commemorate the enlargement of the courtyard of the Mullissu temple at Nineveh, Emašmaš. The construction work and the composition of the inscription, as far as we can tell, took place sometime between Assurbanipal's 25th and 31st regnal years (644–638 BCE). Because the text alludes to a New Year's festival (*akītu*-festival) held in the Assyrian capital in the tenth month of the year, *Tebētu* (= December–January)—which took place in either 645, 644, or 643 BCE—the Mullissu inscription could not have been composed any earlier than 644 BCE or, more likely, before 643 BCE. That New Year's festival—during which four captured foreign rulers were hitched up to the king's processional carriage like horses and made to transport Assurbanipal between Mullissu's temple and the New Year's temple (also located in Nineveh's citadel)—might have been the occasion that (directly) led to the renovation and enlargement of Emašmaš, which might have been showing its age when Assurbanipal visited it during the festival's ceremonies, especially when compared to the newly-renovated and sumptuously-decorated New Year's temple (*akītu*-house); see the commentary to lines 6–10 below.

The inscription was dedicated to Mullissu, the primary occupant of Emašmaš, the temple whose courtyard Assurbanipal was enlarging and having paved with limestone slabs inscribed with copies of this text. This dedicatory inscription not only commemorates the construction work, for which the Assyrian king hopes he will be remembered for eternity, but credits Nineveh's tutelary deity for allowing him to do so by granting him victory over his most recalcitrant foes, specifically five Elamite kings who were constant thorns in his side. On account of his pious deeds, specifically the enlargement of the courtyard of Mullissu's temple in this text, Assurbanipal prays that this divine patron of his look favorably upon him and grant him a gift of a long, happy life. The text was not only composed to cement Assurbanipal's place in history as one Emašmaš builder, but also to show his piety to Mullissu, to whom Assurbanipal expresses his gratitude for her support in battle.

## Variation and Reception

The distribution of lines in the inscription varies from slab to slab. In most exemplars, the text is written in eighteen or nineteen lines; in a handful of instances, it was written in seventeen or twenty lines. The contents of the Mullissu Inscription, as far as we can tell, are fairly uniform, that is, there are no significant text variants in the known/published exemplars. There are, however, numerous minor (orthographic) variants in the spelling of individual words, but this is not uncommon for inscriptions written in Akkadian, in (Neo-Assyrian) cuneiform script. Moreover, some copies of the text have a horizontal ruling between each line of text, while others do not.

In all instances, the inscribed surfaces of the paving stones were laid face down, with their uninscribed surfaces exposed. In antiquity, the Mullissu Inscription would have had a very limited audience since it was hidden beneath the surface of the courtyard of the Emašmaš temple; this would have prevented the text from weathering and from wear and tear of daily foot traffic. The king, his inner circle (especially the

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<sup>1</sup> For an image of exemplar 5 (BM 124813), see [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_124813](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_124813).

learned men responsible for the composition of Assurbanipal's inscriptions), the men who engraved the text on the slabs, the workmen who laid the paving stones, (some) members of Emašmaš's temple personnel, and the goddess Mullissu were likely the only people aware of the existence of the Mullissu Inscription, at least until the first copies were discovered and brought back to London in the mid-nineteenth century. Like many other texts incorporated into the physical structure of a building, this text was intended to have a limited reception. As the inscribed face of the slab was not visible to the people working in or visiting Mullissu's temple, it is clear that the text was primarily written for Mullissu, who could read the inscription despite the fact that it was approximately fifteen centimeters below the surface of her courtyard. This is also apparent from the text's opening dedication (line 1) and concluding prayer (14b–18), in which Assurbanipal directly addresses Nineveh's divine patron to grant him favors for the good deeds mentioned in the inscription itself (the enlargement of Emašmaš's courtyard). Future (Assyrian) rulers would have been a secondary audience of this text since any subsequent king, presumably one of Assurbanipal's descendants, would have seen this inscription when their workmen were removing the old, dilapidating structure of the temple in order to rebuild or restore Nineveh's most holy temple. Since the Assyrian Empire effectively came to an abrupt end in 612 BCE when Nineveh was sacked by a coalition of Babylonian and Median forces, Mullissu's temple fell into ruin and was not rebuilt and, thus, none of Assurbanipal's (direct) descendants ever found the hidden prayer to Nineveh's patron deity.

## Comparative Features

The Mullissu Inscription more or less follows the standard/usual style of a Late Neo-Assyrian dedicatory inscription (744–612 BC), especially one written on a clay or stone architectural feature incorporated into the physical structure of a temple. The size of each slab, which could be as long as sixty centimeters and as wide as forty-five centimeters, allowed Assurbanipal and his imagemakers to compose a text longer than the dedicatory inscriptions written on bricks, stone blocks, and door sockets. Because the scribes had the space to write out a text of about one hundred words, the king was able to include a short prayer at the end of the inscription, albeit a shorter one than the prayers included in dedications inscribed on metal-plated objects and architectural features decorating the most important rooms (the ante-cellas and cellas) and gateways of Assyria's temples, which had larger writings surfaces to accommodate longer inscriptions and concluding prayers.

Assurbanipal had a similar inscription written on the limestone slabs that paved the courtyard of Ezida, the temple of the god Nabû that was immediately north of Emašmaš. The structure and contents of the so-called Nabû Inscription are more or less the same as the Mullissu Inscription, with the exception that the opening dedication and concluding prayer are addressed to the god of scribes, rather than to Nineveh's patron goddess.

An unusual feature of the Mullissu Inscription, as well as the Nabû Inscription, is the reference to military successes. This is not common for dedicatory inscriptions written on a clay or stone architectural feature of a temple. It was, however, typical for longer dedicatory inscriptions written on (unsculptured) wall slabs (like the Inscription from the Ishtar Temple, a 183-line Akkadian dedicatory inscription that lined the walls of one or more rooms of Emašmaš) or metal-plated objects of a martial nature (like a gold-plated bow or knife) to refer to the king's victories on the battlefield.

## Translation: *Assurbanipal's Mullissu Inscription*

(1) For the goddess Mullissu, the lady of the lands who dwells in Emašmaš:

(2–5) Assurbanipal, king of Assyria, the ruler who reveres her, the governor (who is) the creation of her hands, who, at her great command, cut off the head of Teumman, the king of the land Elam, in the thick of battle.

(6–12a) Moreover, with her great support, I defeated Ummanigaš (Ḫumban-nikaš II), the land Tammariṭu, Pa'ê, (and) Ummanaldašu (Ḫumban-ḫaltaš III), who had

exercised kingship over Elam after Teumman, and (then) harnessed them to a processional carriage, the vehicle of my royal majesty. Furthermore, at her (Mullissu's) stern pronouncement, I marched through all of the lands and had no rival (therein).

(12b–14a) Moreover, at that time, I enlarged the structure of the courtyard of the temple of the goddess Ishtar, my lady, with massive (blocks of) limestone.

(14b–18) On account of this, O Mullissu, may this courtyard be acceptable to you. Grant me — Assurbanipal, the one who reveres your great divinity—long life (lit. “life of long days”) (and) happiness, and (then) may my feet grow old walking about in Emašmaš!

### Commentary on Assurbanipal's Mullissu Inscription

Line 1: Akkadian dedicatory inscriptions begin with the preposition *ana* (“for”), the name of the deity to whom the inscription and object are dedicated, and one or more titles/epithets. One expects the dedication section of this text to end with “his lady” (*bēltišu*).

Lines 4–5: In this text, Mullissu, rather than the goddess Ishtar of Arbela (modern Erbil), is credited with ordering the decapitation of the hostile and arrogant Elamite ruler Teumman; the death of this foe of Assyria in the battle of Til-Tūba, which is extensively recorded in both texts and art, took place in 653 BCE. In this text, as well as in the Nabû Inscription, Assurbanipal takes credit for personally beheading Teumman, when in reality the Elamite king was beheaded by a common, unnamed soldier in the Assyrian army.

Lines 6–10: According to Assurbanipal's annalistic texts, Tammarītu killed Ummanigaš (Ḫumban-nikaš II) and his family (presumably also his younger brother Tammarītu). The composer(s) of the Mullissu Inscription, as well as the Nabû Inscription, imply that Ummanigaš was alive and that this deposed Elamite ruler was living out his days in Nineveh, serving the Assyrian king, including pulling his chariot during New Year's festivals. It has been tentatively proposed that the Ummanigaš mentioned in this text might be a different Ummanigaš. However, that seems highly unlikely since only deposed rulers are known to have been humiliated by being harnessed to Assurbanipal's processional carriage during religious ceremonies and, therefore, the composers of this Mullissu Inscription clearly believed that the Ummanigaš they were referring to was none other than the former Elamite king who had lived in the court at Nineveh between 664 and 653, even though he is reported to have been killed many years earlier. This is suggested by the fact that the order of Elamite rulers is roughly chronological, from earliest to latest: Ummanigaš (Ḫumban-nikaš II), Tammarītu, Pâê, and Ummanaldašu (Ḫumban-ḫaltaš III). The name of Ummanigaš must have been intentionally substituted for that of the recalcitrant Arabian ruler in order to maintain the theme of Assurbanipal's victories over Elam.

The best-known account of the New Year's festival in which captured foreign rulers were hitched up to the king's processional carriage like horses and made to transport Assurbanipal between Mullissu's temple and the New Year's temple reads:

(As for) Tammarītu, Pâê, (and) Ummanaldašu (Ḫumban-ḫaltaš III), who had exercised dominion over the land Elam after one another (and) whom I had made bow down to my yoke through the might of (the god) Ashur and the goddess Ishtar, my lords, (and) Uaite', the king of the land of the Arabs whose defeat I had brought about by the command of (the god) Ashur and the goddess Ishtar (and whom) I had taken [out of] his (own) [lan]d to Assyria—after I had gone up to perform sacrifices (and) had performed the rites of the akītu-house in Emašmaš, the seat of their dominion, before the goddess Mullissu—the mother of the great gods, the spouse loved by (the god) Ashur—I made them take hold of the yoke of (my) processional carriage. They pulled (it) up to the gate of the temple while I was seated above them (lit. “while (they were)

below me"). (There) I humbled myself (lit. "I stroked my nose") (and) paid careful attention to their divinity. In a rally of my troops, I made visible their (the god's) strength, (through) which the deities Ashur, Sîn, Shamash, Adad, Bēl (Marduk), Nabû, Ishtar of Nineveh, Šarrat-Kidmuri, Ishtar of Arbela, Ninurta, Nergal, (and) Nusku made those insubmissive to me bow down to my yoke (and) made me stand over my enemies in mighty victories.<sup>2</sup>

Line 12b–14a: The claims made about this king's work on the courtyard of Emašmaš can be confirmed from the known limestone slabs (*pili ešqi*) inscribed with the Mullissu Inscription.

Line 16: One copy of the text has "her great divinity" (*ilūtīša rabīti*) rather than "your divinity" (*ilūtiki rabīti*).

Lines 14b–18: In dedicatory inscriptions, the prayer, or petition, section generally begins with *ana šatti* ("on account of") and the name of the deity to whom prayer is addressed. Compare the concluding prayer of the very similar Nabû Inscription, which is also inscribed on limestone slabs paving the courtyard of a temple: "On account of this, O Nabû, look upon (this courtyard) with pleasure and may it be acceptable to you. May (the command for) a long life for me (lit. 'a life of my long days') come forth from your lips through your reliable cuneiform sign(s). May my feet grow old walking about in Ezida in your divine presence!"

Line 17: One exemplar has "my long life (lit. 'life of my long days') (*balāt ūmē arkūti*)" rather than "long life (lit. 'life of long days') (*balāt ūmēya arkūti*)," which is used in all of the known copies of the concluding prayer of the Nabû Inscription.

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<sup>2</sup> Translation from Novotny and Jeffers, 2018, 261 no. 11 x 17–39. This description comes a 1300-line Akkadian inscription that was inscribed on ten-sided clay prisms. The event described here likely took place in 644 or 643 BCE.

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# Graffiti and Inscriptions from Roman Palestine, Syria, Rome, Egypt, and Greece

*Karen Stern*

Region:	Syro-Palestine, Egypt, Rome, Greece and the Aegean, Anatolia
Date:	4th century BCE–7th/8th century CE
Time/Occasion:	Various: funerary inscriptions; synagogue inscriptions; before or after a dangerous journey
Type/Function:	Various: petitions, blessings, curses; protecting the dead in their tombs; thanksgiving for salvific acts; seeking divine favor; forestalling calamity
Performers:	Individuals
Mode of Recitation:	Inscriptions to be viewed and read out loud by passersby
Place/Space:	Various: tombs, catacombs, synagogues, shrines, natural and open spaces
Materiality:	Stone etchings, painted inscriptions

## Description

Throughout the ancient world, Jews painted and inscribed graffiti and other messages in diverse landscapes—including tombs and catacombs, synagogues and shrines, and natural and open spaces—to exact, enact, and commemorate different forms of supplication. Some offered graffiti as prayers on behalf of the dead. Others wrote them inside shrines and around synagogue walls and architectural features. Still others carved prayers into extreme landscapes, including stone cliffs bracketing expansive deserts, and rocky shores bordering dangerous coastlines, requesting or celebrating writers' improbable survivals through perilous landscapes. Activations of these prayers required at least three interconnected practices: (1) the formulation of a message within a prayer, directed to the dead, the divine, and/or human agents; (2) the carving or painting of an imprecation into a chosen surface; and (3) the witnessing and vocalization of that prayer by an audience (human and/or divine). Thus, while in the modern world acts of writing graffiti are rarely associated with those of prayer, these behaviors were inextricably linked in many cases and contexts in antiquity (Stern 2018).

## Witnesses

People carved graffiti everywhere in the ancient world, throughout open landscapes, around public and civic spaces, as well as inside tombs, pagan temples, Christian shrines, and even synagogues. Many examples are not devotional in nature. But the examples collected here, which derive from disparate regions, periods, and practical contexts, document instances where Jews, just like their non-Jewish neighbors, carved and painted their messages specifically to offer good wishes to be remembered, to bless God, and to solicit divine assistance or intervention. Examples from mortuary contexts—found in both graffiti and epitaphs—derive from Beit She'arim—the largest necropolis of its period and region, situated close to modern Haifa in Israel, which Jews used from the late second to sixth centuries CE. Others remain inside the storied catacombs in Rome where Jews buried their dead in the second through fourth or fifth centuries CE (Rutgers 1995; Noy 1995). Distinct types were also found inside devotional spaces, including the interior of the Dura Europos synagogue, discovered in the 1930s along the modern Iraqi-Syrian border. A final grouping of graffiti written by Jews offers thanksgiving to the divine, and/or requests writers' salvation in the face of imminent danger. These include examples from a sanctuary to the god Pan (the Paneion) within the Egyptian eastern desert



along the route to Berenice and the Red Sea, dating to periods of Ptolemaic rule (third through first centuries BCE); as well as along the rocky shores of Grammata Bay in Syros, Greece, likely from sometime between the fourth and sixth centuries CE. (Stern 2018; Noy, Panayotov, and Bloedhorn 2004). In the latter cases, Jews—including traders and sailors, whose livelihoods depended on traveling in uncertain conditions—used graffiti as a medium to commemorate their previous receipt of divine assistance, or to request divine assistance in the future. These types of prayers, as listed above, are not identical in location, audience, or intent; they recall different subjects, for different purposes, in different languages, and in different times and places. Nevertheless, and in all cases, in addition to their semantic contents and locations, it was the dialogical nature of these graffiti, which relied on their review by witnesses, that assured their functionality as written prayers.

## Formal Description

The formal elements of each type of prayer differed according to their spatial and practical contexts, as well as the objectives of each supplicant. In the prayers that address the dead or the mourners of the dead in Beit She'arim, for instance, some messages: (1) directly address the dead; and (2) invoke for them good wishes and comfort (manifested as good luck, resurrection, courage), particularly given the limitations death imposes (i.e., “no one is immortal!”). Other invocations, found in graffiti in Beit She'arim and inside epitaphs for Jews from Rome, Sicily, and Anatolia, use imprecations and curses to threaten potential tomb violators with punishments by declaring that, if someone opens an associated tomb or moves the bones of the dead, that malefactor will be punished in the form of (a) monetary fines; (b) legal retribution; and even (c) divine wrath (Strubbe 1994). In graffiti and dipinti (painted inscriptions) from devotional contexts, such as the Dura synagogue, prayers follow different formulas that follow other regional types (Stern 2018). They: (1) directly address an audience (human and/or divine); (2) list the first name and sometimes patronymic of the writer and his family; (3) command the audience (human or divine) to remember (*zkr/dkr* in Hebrew/Aramaic and *mnēsthē* in Greek) the named person(s). Sometimes Aramaic versions of the formula also request remembrance “for good” (*ltb*), (4) before (*qdm*) a named deity. A final and third class of graffiti-prayer inscription, written by Jews and others, is also attested in Greek in natural landscapes. These types: (1) directly invoke and praise God (i.e., *theou eulogia*), to whom they sometimes ascribe an epithet; (2) identify an individual (sometimes with patronymic) who wrote or commissioned the written prayer; (3) explicitly or implicitly identify the supplicant as a *Ioudaios*; and sometimes (4) record the dangers that an individual has survived to that point, or the dangers he hopes to survive. It is the public or semi-public display of these types of writing, in specific and strategic locations, that concretizes and activates the associated prayer, holding all viewers—both human and divine—legally accountable for upholding the writers' desired outcomes.

## Occasion and Function

As considered above, occasions for writing graffiti relate to the geographic, architectural, spatial, and practical contexts, as well as the varied objectives and roles of ancient writers and their audiences. Traditional epigraphic approaches to such writings, which drew attention to their paleographic features, scripts, languages, and syntax, missed some of their most distinctive and complex features. Indeed, deeper understandings of the meanings and uses of graffiti for Jewish writers and audiences in antiquity requires attention to multiple other factors, including their syntactical as well as their spatial and practical dimensions, as well as their geographic setting.

## Variation and Reception

Grffiti prayers differ considerably from one another and are context-dependent; their scripts and language patterns, syntax, supplicatory requests, and legal formulations follow conventions of their respective regions, purposes, and anticipated outcomes. Threats of legal retribution for tomb violation in Roman Palestine, for instance, engaged laws and customs that differed slightly from those deployed in comparable contexts in Rome, Sicily, or Asia Minor, even if many of the curses and epitaphs used similar languages and scripts (such as Greek) for the same basic purposes (deflections of tomb violation). Likewise,

and in several respects, salvation prayers, which Jews wrote in Hellenistic Egypt and late ancient Greece, follow distinctive local conventions.

## Comparative Features

Graffiti and dipinti collected here are from diverse regions and thus follow distinct epigraphic patterns endemic to Hellenistic Egypt, Roman Palestine, Roman Syria, Arabia, Rome, or late ancient Greece. It is crucial, therefore, to compare precatory graffiti composed by Jews to others of similar region and type. Some of the differences between graffiti written by Jews and those written by their neighbors can be subtle. For instance, many of the graffiti inside the Dura synagogue use locally common syntax for remembrance prayers but are mostly documented in Aramaic rather than Greek, the more popular epigraphic language for similar graffiti written inside the Mithraeum, Christian buildings, and temples dedicated to Azzanathkona and the Aphlad also located nearby. Many open landscapes where Jews carved prayers were likewise dominated by similar writings composed by non-Jews. In Egypt and Greece, for instance, Jews often wrote prayers in ways and places that were nearly identical to those carved or painted by their neighbors; frequently, it was only inclusions of diagnostically Jewish or biblical names or vocabulary, or of specialized words or symbols, that distinguished their messages and prayers from those written by their non-Jewish neighbors.

## Prayers and Blessings for the Dead

Translation: *Beit She'arim*, Catacomb 20, north entryway (BS II, no. 194, fig. 20, and no. 193, fig. 19)

- a) "Good luck on your resurrection!" (Greek)
- b) "Take courage, pious parents, no one is immortal!" (Greek)

## Commentary

*Prayers and Blessings for the Dead:* These two graffiti appear around the entryway to Catacomb 20 at Beit She'arim, the largest excavated catacomb from the necropolis. They are carved above and beside many pictorial graffiti applied through time and several meters from the closest burial. Their messages may be understood as types of general prayers, offered to, and on behalf of, the dead and their mourners. The scripts of these messages—both in Greek—attest to their antiquity but do not reflect identical hands. The first of these, which wishes the dead "Good luck on your resurrection!" appears on the wall curving toward the ceiling, to the left of a person entering through the associated doorway. This message combines a blessing with a wish for the best possible posthumous outcome: that the deceased will be resurrected (e.g., m. San. 10:1). The second message: "Take courage!" (*Tharsite!*) is carved into the wall facing the entryway in large letters. The latter expression recurs in epitaphs that mark graves from Beit She'arim, offering well wishes and courage to the named dead.

## Curses Against Tomb Violators

Translation: *Beit She'arim*, Catacomb 12, Room III (BS III, 23, col. 1, col. 2=BS II no. 134; cf. Rome [Noy 1995, no. 360])

- a) "Anyone who should open this grave over anyone who is inside will die in an evil end." (Aramaic)
- b) "No one should open (it) in the name of holy (divine) and imperial (state) law!" (Greek)

## Commentary

*Curses Against Tomb Violators:* These two curses appear around the same arcosolium tomb in Catacomb 12, Room III in Beit She'arim. The first inscription, in Aramaic, is painted in red ochre within the arched canopy of the tomb, while the Greek message is painted in red ochre on the wall above it (BS II, no. 134). Neither of these imprecations—quite notably—invoke the divine, but rather the religious and human legal systems whose frameworks might assure retribution for potential malfeasance. One threatens a terrible demise for potential tomb robbers, while the other promises retribution for violating multiple classes of laws (*ten ho sian* and *kata prostag[m]a*). Despite their emphases on punishments for tomb violation, neither of these inscriptions identifies the deceased with a proper name. Indeed, the inscribers of these messages either did not know the identity of the deceased buried below or chose to deliberately obscure that information. In all cases, writers' efforts were futile; a robber's trench was cut through the tomb in antiquity, facilitating access from the adjacent Catacomb 13.

Worth noting is how similar the semantic contents of these graffiti are to portions of epitaphs from Beit She'arim, as well as those erected by Jews in Rome, Sicily, and Anatolia, which name the dead specifically, but also threaten curses for violators of their tombs. For instance, an epitaph from Vigna Randanini in Rome (Noy 1995, no. 360, pl. XVIII) from the third or fourth century CE, ends with the declaration that: "And if anyone opens this tomb and buries someone else, she/he will pay to the treasury 5,000 denarii. And if someone either buys this grave or erases the inscription, the wrath of God will destroy his whole family" (transl. Noy 1995, no. 360). Likewise, a bilingual Hebrew and Latin epitaph from Catania threatens repercussions of multiple types and a fine of ten pounds of silver to anyone who disturbs the bones of a certain Aurelius Samuel and his wife Lassia Irene inside their tomb (Noy 1993, no. 145; Pl. XX). In these epitaphs, it is the named deceased who directly threaten to impose posthumous punishments on potential malefactors. The anonymous imprecations from Catacomb 12 at Beit She'arim, however, appear to serve distinctive functions: they may reflect their writers' altruistic acts to write these messages for the benefit of the dead, regardless of their original names or identities.

## Synagogue Graffiti

**Translation: a) Signature Graffiti, Dura Europos (Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, Syr94a, 94b; Syr95)**

"I am Ḥiya!"

"I am Ḥiya son of Samuel."

"I am Pinḥas, son of Jeremiah, son of..." (all Aramaic)

**Translation: b) Remembrance Formula, Ḥiah's prayer, Dura Europos (Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, Syr91; following reconstruction of Naveh 1979)**

"...Ḥiah son of...from the sons of Levi. May he be remembered for good (in favor) before [the Lord of the] Heavens. Amen. This is a memorial for the good."  
(Aramaic)

## Commentary

*Synagogue Graffiti:* Traditionally these types of graffiti were regarded as truncated commemorative inscriptions (Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 178). But the registers of these graffiti differ in several respects from those displayed in other monumental inscriptions from the same synagogue (Dura Europos), whether recorded in Greek or Aramaic (i.e., Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, nos. Syr84–89). For instance, monumental dedicatory inscriptions that invoke the names and memory of individuals either: (1) explicitly demand

remembrance in a public place for a named individual because he/she had given a specific preliminary gift to the synagogue building, i.e., “Samuel bar Saphara, may he be remembered, established these things thus” (Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, Syr87); and/or (2) appeared directly upon the gift that individual had donated, i.e., “I...made the Torah shrine” (Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, Syr89). Yet graffiti that consist of signatures (names and patronymics) or those that include remembrance formulas (*dkr ltb* in Aramaic), often appear in clusters—a pattern that mediates against arguments of collective donation or sponsorship for that same architectural feature. For these and additional reasons, the improved reading of these inscriptions here follows arguments of Naveh (1979), who succinctly noted that signature and remembrance formulas, common in Semitic languages like Aramaic, could also serve as independent prayers when inscribed on various surfaces (Stern 2018). The more extended remembrance formula, included here as Aḥiah’s prayer and restored by Naveh, reflects a robust regional pattern in graffiti that do the following: (1) request remembrance for a certain individual; (2) name that individual; (3) threaten curses to passersby (“if he does not remember the name of so-and-so”); (4) stereotypically use the word “before” (*qdm*) to locate the prayer in the presence of (5) a named deity/deities (here: [*mry š*] *my*, “the Lord of the Heavens”). These extended remembrance graffiti, commonly executed in Aramaic and Semitic dialects, not only constitute prayers but also invoke divine witnesses to pro-actively establish a contract between the writer and future readers and to coerce those future readers to vocalize that inscription to avoid divine punishment. Presumably, following traditional Near Eastern blessing/ curse formulas, if the passersby read out loud the name or remembrance graffiti they encountered, they would then be blessed; only if they were capable of reading but did not vocalize the inscription would they be cursed. While the most extended versions of this inscription found in the ruins of the Dura Europos synagogue are truncated (as in Aḥiah’s version), they explicitly mediate between a divine and human audience, and implicate the power of vocalization and remembrance before the divine inside the synagogue.

## Blessings and Thanksgiving Graffiti

Translation: El-Kanaïs, Temple of Pan, third through first centuries BCE (Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 121)

“Praise to God. Theodotos, son of Dorion, the *Ioudaiois* [=the Jew or the Judean]  
safely returned from the sea.” (Greek)

## Commentary

*Blessings and Thanksgiving Graffiti*: This prayer, carved or commissioned by a certain Theodotos, is less elaborate than many other examples found in surrounding areas of the Paneion, a sanctuary to Pan in the middle of the Eastern Desert. Using graffiti to offer thanks in this place was both logical and customary: Pan (who, by the Ptolemaic period had assimilated the traits of the local Egyptian god Min) was the patron god of desert wanderers, hunters, and voyagers, as well as of the desert itself. Many of the graffiti from the Paneion therefore praise Pan using his various epithets, recording writers’ appreciation and thanks for his intercession, which had assured their improbable survivals during their perilous journeys through the sea, desert, and the hunt. Theodotos’ inscription commands readers to offer a blessing or praise to the divine (*theou eulogia*) for having saved him. In this respect, the syntax of his inscription resembles many other examples found along the same cliffs, which command their readers to celebrate the god Pan. But by contrast to other inscriptions, Theodotos’ message, alongside another carved by a certain Ptolemy, son of Dionysios (also named as a *Ioudaios*), includes the abstract name for the deity to be praised. Theodotos’ message intones “*theou eulogia*,” while Ptolemy’s begins with the phrase: “*eulogei ton theon*” (Horbury and Noy 1992, no. 122). While some might be surprised that a *Ioudaios* (a Judean or Jew) might offer a thanksgiving prayer to god—the Jewish God—within a sanctuary to Pan, explicit identification of the named individuals as *Ioudaios/oi* makes their origins incontrovertible. Indeed, appearances of these and other local inscriptions, which other *Ioudaioi* also wrote inside the Paneion, attest to the existence of shared sacred landscapes in antiquity, in which Jews and their neighbors sometimes offered written prayers to their own gods together (Stern 2018).

## Salvation Graffiti

Translation: Grammata Bay, Syros, Greece (IJO I, Ach 72)

“Lord! Give help to your servant [images of oil flask, menorah, lulab] Eunomios  
and to all his crew, Naxians!” (Greek)

### Commentary

*Salvation Graffiti*: Multiple inscriptions of comparable syntax were carved beside Eunomios’s message along the rocky shore of Grammata Bay on the northwest side of the Greek island of Syros. Many (at least sixteen) were written using similar vocabulary, also addressing the divine as “*K(yri)e Boethe*,” most such examples, however, were written by individuals and groups who identified themselves as Christians. Maritime voyages were extraordinarily dangerous, particular in antiquity, which explains why so many merchants and sailors carved their messages into the durable stone shoreline to solicit and give thanks for divine assistance for themselves and for their shipmates during journeys. Their inscriptions, like Eunomios’s message, were carved carefully within rectangular borders or *tabula ansatas*, which created enclosures inside which textual and figural elements might be combined. Eunomios’s message, for instance, was joined at its upper right with images of a carefully carved, seven-branched menorah on a tripod base, which was situated between other implements associated with the Jerusalem Temple. The clustering of these images, along with their adjacency to the inscription within the *tabula*, identifies the supplicant, Eunomios, as a Jew. Not all writers, however, wrote for the same purposes. For instance, some sailors in Syros also carved graffiti to thank God for having survived past journeys, as had others around the Paneion in El-Kanaïs: another graffito from Grammata Bay, for example, carved beside a menorah and in the name of a certain Heortylis the *Ioudaios*, “in the name of the living God” (“*epi onomatos th[eo]u Zon[tos]*”) offered thanks for his (and his crew’s) survival to that point (e.g., IJO I Ach73). But in Syros, additional people, including Eunomios, wrote their messages into the landscape for distinct reasons: they wrote prayers prophylactically, appealing to God in order to stave off future disasters that might await them inside the surrounding waters.

Worth noting is that traditions of inscribing graffiti for devotional purposes continued through the medieval period. Precatory graffiti are recorded by Jews along pilgrimage routes in the Sinai desert (Stern 2018); they also recur, in Christian contexts, inside pilgrimage churches throughout the Holy Land (including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Church of the Nativity, Monastery of the Cross), as well as inside eastern Orthodox churches from regions that stretch from Cyprus through Armenia (Yasin 2015). Practices of writing graffiti as forms of prayer were not only perpetuated in late antiquity, but also persisted in multiple sites and spaces through the twentieth century CE.

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