

Prayer in the Ancient World

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.

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.

Table of Contents of *Prayer in the Ancient World*

Contributors to *Prayer in the Ancient World*

Sample entry from the section on Sumerian and Akkadian Prayer:

King Assurbanipal's Prayer to the Goddess Mullissu (Jamie Novotny)

Sample entry from the section on Jewish Prayer in the Rabbinic Period:

Graffiti and Inscriptions from Roman Palestine, Syria, Rome, Egypt, and Greece (Karen Stern)

Prayer in the Ancient World

Daniel K. Falk and Rodney A. Werline, General Editors

Table of Contents

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

General Editors: Daniel K. Falk and Rodney A. Werline

1. Rationale of PAW

2. Challenges in the Study of Prayer

2.1. Definition

2.2. Nature of Sources

2.3. Prayer, Magic, Blessing, and Cursing

2.4. Language of Prayer

3. Methods in the Study of Prayer

3.1. Ritual Settings and Actors

4. Comparative Study of Prayer

4.1. Descriptive Categories

5. Guide to PAW

5.1. Compromises

5.2. Functionality

SUMERIAN AND AKKADIAN PRAYER

Area Editor: Nicole Brisch

Introduction

1. Incantation Prayers

1.1. Opening Prayer of the Anti-Witchcraft Ritual (*maqlû*)

1.2. Two Neo-Assyrian Incantation-Prayers to Personal Gods

1.3. Hand-Lifting Prayer (*Shuilla*) to the Goddess Ishtar

1.4. Babylonian Incantation-Prayer from Ugarit

1.5. Incantation-Prayer Accompanying a Birth from Kanesh

2. Penitential Prayers

2.1. Bilingual Sumerian and Akkadian Prayer to the Personal God

2.2. Negative Confession of the King During the New Year's Festival

3. Prayers in Divination

3.1. Akkadian Prayer for Blessings in Divination Rituals (*ikribu*)

3.2. Akkadian Oracular Query (*tamītu*) to the Sun God Shamash

4. Lamentation Prayers in Sumerian Emesal

4.1. Prayer Accompanied by a Harp (*balağ*) ("That City, Which Has Been Plundered," *uru₂ am₃-ma-i-rabi*)

4.2. Prayer Accompanied by a Harp (*balağ*) ("The Wild Bull in His Fold," *am-e amaš-a-na*)

5. Hymns as Prayers

- 5.1. Sumerian Hymn to the Goddess Inana (The Exaltation of Inana = Inana B)
- 5.2. Akkadian Hymn to the Healing Goddess (The Gula hymn of Bulluṣa-rabi)
- 5.3. Akkadian Prayer to the God Marduk

6. Prayers in the Form of Letters of Petition

- 6.1. Sumerian Letter-Prayer from the Woman Inannakam to the Goddess Nintinugga

7. Prayers on Statues and Other Monuments

- 7.1. Middle Babylonian Blessings and Curses on Boundary Stones (Kudurrus)
- 7.2. Sumerian Prayer on the Statue of Gudea, Ruler of Lagash (Statue B)
- 7.3. King Assurbanipal's Prayer to the Goddess Mullissu
- 7.4. Prayer and Curse on the Statue of Idrimi of Alalakh

Bibliography

EGYPTIAN PRAYER

Area Editor: Holger Kockelmann

Introduction

1. Prayers and Hymns in Temple Cult and Ritual Practice

- 1.1. Royal Evening Prayer Addressed to Re and Hathor (Stela New York MMA 13.182.3)
- 1.2. Royal Prayer for Divine Support in the Construction of a Temple (Stela Gurna no. 3)
- 1.3. Prayers in Ritual Practice (P. London BM 10188 [P. Bremner-Rhind])

2. Prayers in Private Devotion

- 2.1. Prayers and the Hereafter (P. London BM EA 10299)
- 2.2. Penitential Prayer with Warning for Divine Revenge for Offences (Stela Turin, Museo Egizio 1593 + 1649)
- 2.3. Request for Health and Life without Shortening (Stela Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 897)
- 2.4. Prayer for Eternal Supply by Participation in the Divine Cult (Statue, Brighton Art Gallery)
- 2.5. Prayer to the Gods of the West for a Perfect Life and Perfect Burial (Graffito Sakkara, Precinct of King Djoser)
- 2.6. Prayer for Protection (Graffito Deir el-Bahari 15)
- 2.7. Dedicatory Prayer (*proskynema*) with Plea to Isis (Gr. Philae 421)

3. Prayers as Scribal Exercises

- 3.1. Hymn and Prayer to Thoth for Supply and Protection (Writing Board, London BM EA 5646)
- 3.2. Prayer to the Goddess Mut for Support (O. Deir el-Medineh 1638)

Bibliography

HITTITE PRAYER

Area Editor: Billie Jean Collins

Introduction

1. Independent Prayers

- 1.1. Old Babylonian Prayer to Adad in Hittite Translation to Accompany an Oracular Consultation (CTH 313)

- 1.2. Prayers to the Sun God to Reconcile the Supplicant with His Personal Deity (CTH 372, 373, 374)
- 1.3. Prayer Recitation for the Support of the Sun Goddess of the Earth (CTH 371)
- 1.4. Mursili II's Invocation and Plea to the Sun Goddess of Arinna Regarding Plague and Enemy Attack (CTH 376.1)
- 1.5. Daily Prayer to Telipinu for the Wellbeing of the Royal Family (CTH 377)
- 1.6. Muwatalli I's Model Prayer and Ritual to the Assembly of Gods (CTH 381)
- 1.7. Pleas of Puduhepa to Various Deities for the Recovery of Hattusili III (CTH 384)

- 2. Vows
- 2.1. Records of Vows Made by Queen Puduhepa (CTH 584 and 585)

- 3. Evocations
- 3.1. Various Evocations: Celebration of the Storm God of Kuliwina (CTH 330); Myth of the Disappearance of Hannahanna (CTH 334); Ritual of the *Purapsi*-Priests for the Purification of a Temple (CTH 472); Evocation of the Cedar Deities (CTH 483); Evocation of the Mother Goddesses, Fate Goddesses, Zukki, and Anzili (CTH 484); Ritual and Prayer for Istar of Nineveh (CTH 716)
- 3.2. Evocation of Mallidunna for the Appeasement of Hannahanna (CTH 403.2)
- 3.3. Sacrifice and Prayer for the Return of the Storm God of Nerik (CTH 671)

- 4. Short Prayer Recitations in Rituals
- 4.1. Four Old Hittite Rituals with Recitations for the Purification of the King and Queen (CTH 416)
- 4.2. Ambazzi's Ritual and Prayer for an Afflicted Child (CTH 429.1)
- 4.3. Paskuwatti's Ritual to Cure Sexual Dysfunction (CTH 406)

5. Incantations

- 5.1. Incantations in Magic Rituals

6. Curses and Blessings

- 6.1. Curses and Blessings in Hittite State Treaties
- 6.2. Curses in an Oath Ceremony for the Military
- 6.3. Blessings in Hittite Letters
- 6.4. Curses in Iron Age Luwian, Lydian, and Lycian Inscriptions

Bibliography

PRAYER IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND JUDAH

Area Editor: Rodney A. Werline

Introduction

- 1. Doxology, Praise, Thanksgiving, Blessing and Praise of God
 - 1.1. Psalm of General Praise (Ps 147)
 - 1.2. Declaration of God's Holiness (Trisagion, Isa 6:3)
 - 1.3. Thanksgiving for God's Creation and Salvation (Ps 136)
 - 1.4. Praise for Deliverance from Enemy (Exod 15:1–18)
 - 1.5. Doxology for a Revelation (Dan 2:19–23)
 - 1.6. Blessings and Petitions in David's Departing Scene (1 Chr 29:10–20)
 - 1.7. Thanksgiving for Birth (1 Sam 2:1–10)

- 2. Offering Prayer
 - 2.1. Dedication of a Harvest Offering (Deut 26:1–15)

3. Psalms for Approaching the Sanctuary

- 3.1. Psalm of Pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Ps 121)
- 3.2. Psalm of Entrance to the Temple (Ps 24)

4. Psalms for Welfare of the King

- 4.1. Blessing before Battle (Ps 20)
- 4.2. Thanksgiving upon Return from Battle (Ps 21)
- 4.3. Prayer for Temple and Davidic Kingship (2 Sam 7:18–29)

5. Prayers and Psalms of Complaint or Lament

- 5.1. Personal Complaint or Lament (Ps 22)
- 5.2. Request for Help in Desperate Situation (Ps 6)
- 5.3. Complaint about Prophetic Task (Jer 20:7–18)
- 5.4. National Lament and Prayer Against Enemies (Ps 137)
- 5.5. Complaint and Lament about Destruction and Exile (Lam 5:1–22)

6. Prayers During or to Avert National Disasters

- 6.1. Prayers to End Drought (Jer 14:1–9)
- 6.2. Prayer for Protection from Invading Army (Isa 37:14–20)

7. Prayers for Help and Healing

- 7.1. Prayer when in Despair (Ps 88)
- 7.2. Psalm Assuring Protection (Ps 91)
- 7.3. Moses's Intercession for Miriam's Healing (Num 12:9–15)
- 7.4. Raising of a Widow's Son (1 Kgs 17:18–22)

8. Penitential Prayers

- 8.1. Prayer of Confession for Communal Sin (Ezra 9)
- 8.2. Prayer of Personal Confession (Ps 51)

9. Prayer for Welfare of Community

- 9.1. Moses's Intercession on Behalf of the People (Exod 32:11–14)

10. Vows

- 10.1. Jacob Promises Allegiance to God upon Safe Return Home (Gen 28:18–22)
- 10.2. Vow to Publicly Thank God if Delivered (Ps 35:17–18)
- 10.3. Vow to Praise God with Song at Altar (Ps 43:3–4)

11. Blessings

- 11.1. Priestly Blessing over the People (Aaronic Blessing, Num 6:22–27)
- 11.2. Blessing of Greeting (Ruth 2:4–5)
- 11.3. Laban's Blessing upon Departure (Gen 31:49)
- 11.4. Blessing for Prosperity or Progeny (Gen 12:2–3)
- 11.5. Isaac's Final Blessing on Jacob (Gen 27:27–29)
- 11.6. Blessing upon Relative and God (Ruth 2:19–20; 4:11–12)
- 11.7. Blessings for Obedience (Deut 28:1–7, 15–19)

12. Epigraphic Prayers

- 12.1. Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom Inscriptions
- 12.2. Lachish Letter

13. Curses

- 13.1. Curses upon the Wicked (Ps 109)
- 13.2. Curses for Disobeying Prohibitions (Deut 27:14–26)

13.3. Curses on Enemy Kingdoms (Ps 83)

14. Didactic Prayers

- 14.1. Instructions about Addressing Sin (1 Kgs 8)
- 14.2. Instructions about the Wise and the Wicked (Ps 1)
- 14.3. Exhortations to Pursue Righteousness (Ps 34)

Bibliography

EARLY ALPHABETIC AND NORTHWEST SEMITIC PRAYER

Area Editor: Jennifer Singletary

Introduction

1. Early Alphabetic Votive Inscriptions

- 1.1. Inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem and Wadi el-Ḥôl

2. Ugaritic Prayers

- 2.1. Petition to Ba'lu to Protect the City Walls (RS 24.266)
- 2.2. Petition to a List of Deities for Well-Being (RS 24.271)
- 2.3. Hymn to the Sun Goddess in the Ba'lu Cycle (KTU 1.6 VI 42-54)
- 2.4. Kirta's Vow to 'Atiratu (KTU 1.14 IV 194-206)
- 2.5. Incantations for Healing and Protection
- 2.6. Invocations of the Deceased (RS 24.257, RS 94.2518)
- 2.7. Blessings in a Divine Drinking Rite (RS 24.252)
- 2.8. Votive Inscription to Rašap-Guni on a Drinking Vessel (RS 25.318)

3. Aramaic Prayers

- 3.1. Curses in Tel Fekheriye Inscription, the Sefire Treaties, and the Bukan Inscription (KAI 309, KAI 222-224, KAI 320)
- 3.2. Zakkur Inscription (KAI 202)
- 3.3. Funerary Stelae for Priests of the Moon God from Nerab

4. Phoenician Prayers

- 4.1. Petitions for Protection on Phoenician and Punic Amulets
- 4.2. Punic Votive Inscriptions
- 4.3. Gestures of Prayer on Seals and Stelae

Bibliography

JEWISH PRAYER IN THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD

Area Editor: Daniel K. Falk

Introduction

1. Collections of Communal Liturgical Prayers

- 1.1. Communal Petitions for Days of the Week: Prayer for Friday (*Words of the Luminaries*, 4Q504)
- 1.2. Morning and Evening Blessings for Days of the Month (*Daily Prayers*, 4Q503)
- 1.3. Communal Prayers for Annual Festivals (*Festival Prayers*, 4Q509)

2. Prayers Accompanying Rituals

- 2.1. Priestly Prayer Accompanying Sacrifice at Purification of Temple (2 Macc 1:23-30)

- 2.2. Blessings and Curses in Covenant Commitment Ceremony from Qumran (1QS 1:16– 2:18)
- 2.3. Prayers During Purification Immersion Rituals from Qumran (4Q512)
- 2.4. Psalm to Yaho at New Year Sacrificial Banquet (pap Amherst 63, xiii 1–10)

3. Prayers for Welfare of the Community

- 3.1. Prayer of High Priest Simon for Protection of Jerusalem (3 Macc 2:1–20)
- 3.2. Petitions for Mercy on Israel (Sir 36:1–22)
- 3.3. Prayer of Baruch for Protection of Israel in Eschatological Crisis (2 Bar 48:2–24)
- 3.4. Prayer for King Jonathan (4Q448)
- 3.5. Petition to Yaho for Help in Distress (pap Amherst 63, xii 11–19)

4. Occasional Prayers

- 4.1. Blessing before Meal by Eleazar High Priest (Ep. Aristeas 185)
- 4.2. Thanksgiving Prayer after Meal by Isaac (Jub 22:6)
- 4.3. Blessing of Kenaz on Witnessing a Miracle (LAB 26:6)

5. War Prayers

- 5.1. Petition of Judas Maccabeus for Victory in Battle (1 Macc 4:30–33)
- 5.2. Ritual Blessings and Curses for Eschatological War (*War Scroll*, 1QM 13)

6. Blessings and Curses

- 6.1. Ritual Cursing of Belial (*Berakhot*, 4Q286 1 i, 7 i–ii)
- 6.2. Eschatological Blessings on Community Leaders (1QSb)

7. Hymns

- 7.1. Song of Thanksgiving for Safety (Tob 13:1–18)
- 7.2. Blessings of All Creation (Song of Three Jews, Pr Azar 28–68)
- 7.3. Thanksgiving for Divine Insight (*Hodayot*, 1QH^a 19:6–17)
- 7.4. “Bless, O My Soul, the Lord”—Hymns of Thanksgiving for Deliverance (*Barkhi Nafshi*, 4Q434)
- 7.5. Psalm of Vengeance on Enemy Nations (PssSol 2)
- 7.6. Eschatological Psalm of Vengeance on the Wicked (PssSol 17)

8. Lamentations

- 8.1. Baruch’s Lament over Jerusalem (2 Bar 35:1–5)
- 8.2. Communal Lament Seeking Vengeance (*apocLam B*, 4Q501)

9. Mystical Prayers and Hymns

- 9.1. Hymns of Angelic Worship for Sabbath (*Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, 4QShirShabb)

10. Prayers of Inquiry/Divination

- 10.1. Baruch’s Prayer for Insight (2 Bar 38:1–4)

11. Prayers and Hymns for Instruction

- 11.1. Instructional Prayer for Wisdom (Wis 9)

12. Prayers of Confession/Penitence

- 12.1. Communal Petition of Repentance and Plea for Deliverance (Prayer of Azariah, Dan 3:24–45 LXX)
- 12.2. Individual Prayer of Repentance (Prayer of Manasseh)

13. Prayers for Healing and Protection

- 13.1. Petition for Spiritual Protection (Sir 23:1–6)
- 13.2. Poetic Prayer for Spiritual Strength and Protection from Evil Spirits (*Plea for Deliverance*, 11QPs^a 19:1–18)

14. Incantations

- 14.1. Incantation Prayer for Knowledge (Prayer of Jacob)
- 14.2. Exorcism Incantations (*Songs of the Sage*, 4Q511)
- 14.3. Psalms for Protection against Demons (11QapocPs^a, 4Q560)
- 14.4. Prayer for Protection against Demons (Pap Fouad 203)

15. Inscribed and Graffiti Prayers

- 15.1. Thanksgiving for Safe Travel at Temple of Pan at El-Kanais in Egypt (CIJ 2: 1537 = JIGRE 121)
- 15.2. Prayer for Vengeance in Epitaph of Heraclea (CIJ 725)
- 15.3. Burial Vow-Curse (Qorban)

16. Oaths and Vows

- 16.1. Vow to Praise (4Q427 15–6)
- 16.2. Covenant Oath
- 16.3. Dedication Vow
- 16.4. Prohibitive Vow
- 16.5. Vow-Curse

17. Amulets and Other Objects

- 17.1. Tefillin from Qumran

Bibliography

JEWISH PRAYER IN THE RABBINIC PERIOD

Area Editor: Richard Sarason

Introduction

1. Blessings

- 1.1. Rabbinic Blessing-Form (*berakhah*) and Occasional Blessings
- 1.2. Blessings after Meals (*birkat hamazon*)
- 1.3. Passover Meal Ritual (*seder*)
- 1.4. Blessings for Circumcision, Marriage, and Burial (m. *Šabb.* 19:2,6; t. *Šabb.* 6:12–13; m. *Qidd.* 1:1; t. *Meg.* 3:14; b. *Ketub.* 7b–8a; m. *Meg.* 4:3; b. *Meg.* 23b; t. *Ber.* 3:24; b. *Ket.* 8b; b. *Ber.* 46b)
- 1.5. Blessings Surrounding the Recitation of Shema (*geriat šema*)

2. Communal Liturgical Prayers

- 2.1. Daily Communal Petitions (*tefillah/amidah*)

3. Communal Prayers of Confession/Penitence

- 3.1. Penitential Prayer and Confession on Day of Atonement

4. Intercessory Prayers

- 4.1. Forceful Intercessory Prayers of Holy Men

5. Litanies

- 5.1. Litanies for Rain (MS. Oxford Heb. g2.59, 1v; MS. British Museum Or. 1067; Goldschmidt, *Mahzor leyamim hanora'im* 2:55)

6. Personal/Individual Petitionary Prayer

- 6.1. Personal Petitions on Various Occasions

7. Doxology

7.1. Praise after Exposition of Scripture (*qaddiš*)

8. Hymns and Religious Poetry

8.1. Psalmody for the Festivals (*hallel*)

8.2. Hymnic Blessing following Psalmody (*birkat hašir*)

8.3. Sanctification Imitating the Angelic Choir (*qedušah*)

8.4. Mystical/Theurgic Hymns from *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

8.5. Hymn Sung by the Throne of Glory (*Heikhalot Rabbati* 251–257)

8.6. Hymn for the Day of Atonement (*piyyut*, “When there was no sound”)

8.7. Hymn for the Day of Atonement (*piyyut*, “We have no High Priest”)

8.8. Hymn for the New Year (*piyyut*, “Let us declare the awesome sanctity of this day”)

8.9. Hymns (*qedušta'ot*) for the Sabbath by Yannai

8.10. Hymn (*qedušta*) for a Sabbath of Consolation by Eleazar berabbi Qillir (“The mother of children sighs like a dove”)

8.11. Samaritan Hymn by Amram Dare

8.12. Samaritan Hymn by Marqe

9. New Year Ritual

9.1. Shofar-Blowing Ritual for the New Year (*teq'i'ata*)

10. Blessings and Curses

10.1. Prayers, Blessings, and Curses on Magic Bowls, Amulets

10.2. Graffiti and Inscriptions from Roman Palestine, Syria, Rome, Egypt, and Greece

10.3. Blessings and Curses in Talmudic Literature

11. Oaths and Vows

11.1. Oaths and Vows in Talmudic Literature

Bibliography

GREEK PRAYER

Area Editor: William Furley

Introduction

1. Prayers in Wartime

1.1. Petition to Athena for Support in Combat (*arâ*, Homer, *Iliad* 5.114–33 & 5.330–54)

1.2. Prayer to Apollo for Vengeance (*arâ*, Homer, *Iliad* 1.22–43)

1.3. Prayer to Zeus for Victory in Battle (*euchê*, Homer, *Iliad* 2.399–420)

1.4. Prayers to Weather Gods for Destruction of Enemy Fleet (*euchê*, Herodotus 7.189, 191)

1.5. Public Prayer for a Fleet (*euchê*, Thucydides 6.31 passim through 6.32.1)

1.6. Prayer to Local Gods and Heroes before a Siege (*euchê*, Thucydides 2.74.1–2)

1.7. Prayers for Political Unity (*paian* and *euchê*, Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander* 7.11.8–9)

2. Lyric Prayers

2.1. Entreaty to Aphrodite for the Love of an Unnamed Female (*litê*, Sappho Fr. 1)

2.2. Prayer to Dionysus for the Love of Cleobulus (*euchôlê*, Anacreon Fr. 357 [12])

2.3. Prayer to the Nereids and Aphrodite for the Safe Return of the Brother (Sappho Fr. 5)

2.4. Entreaty to Artemis for the Safe Return of Polycrates (*gounasma*, Anacreon Fr. 348)

2.5. Prayer to Zeus by a Fox for Justice (Archilochus Fr. 177 West)

2.6. Petition to Hermes for a Coat (*epeuchê*, Hipponax Frs. 32, 34 West)

2.7. Prayer to Zeus for Rescue (*euchê*, Simonides Fr. 543)

2.8. Supplication to the Sun (after an eclipse) (*paian, iketeia*, Pindar, *Paian* 9)
 2.9. Pelops' prayer to Poseidon for Success in a Chariot-Race (Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 1.71–88)

3. Prayers in Tragedy

3.1. Prayer by Chorus to Zeus (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*)
 3.2. Prayer to the God Sleep (*Hypnos*) (Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 828–38)
 3.3. Paian to Gods for Relief from Plague (*paian*, Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*)
 3.4. Hymn-Prayer to Dionysos (Euripides, *Bacchae*)
 3.5. Hymn-Prayer to Apollo (Euripides, *Ion*)

4. Prayers in Comedy

4.1. Prayer-Hymn to a Lamp (Aristophanes, *Assemblywomen* 1–18)
 4.2. Cletic Prayer to the General Lamachos (Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 566–571)
 4.3. Oath Sacrifice (*horkos*, Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 202–239)
 4.4. Cletic Prayer to Air, Ether and Clouds (*euchê*, Aristophanes, *Clouds* 263–74)
 4.5. Prayer to Hermes for Forgiveness (Aristophanes, *Clouds* 1476–80)

5. Curse Tablets

5.1. Binding Spell from Hellenistic Sicily (*katadesmos, defixio*, Dubois 2008, nr. 80/2)
 5.2. Consecration of Stolen Property to the Underworld Gods (*anierôsis*, MacLachlan 2004–2005)
 5.3. Oath to the Great God against Slander for Witchcraft (*exorkôsis*, Kotansky 2020)

6. Orphic-Bacchic Lamellae

6.1. Directions for a Departed Soul in the Underworld (Bernabé 2004–2007 F 474; Graf & Johnston 2012 no. 1)
 6.2. Underworld Pass for a Dead Soul (Tegou & Tzifopoulos 2021)
 6.3. Underworld Pass for Caecilia Secundina (Bernabé 2004–2007 F 491; Graf & Johnston 2012 no. 9)
 6.4. Underworld Pass for a Dead Soul (Bernabé 2004–2007 F 485; Graf & Johnston 2012 no. 26)

7. Prayers in Attic Oratory

7.1. Prayer for Justice in a Trial and Protection of the Polis (*euchê*, Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 1–2)
 7.2. Prayer to All the Gods for a Fair Hearing and Justice in a Trial (1) (Demosthenes, *On the Crown* 1)
 7.3. Prayer for Fair Hearing and Justice in a Trial (2) (*paraklêsis, euchê*, Demosthenes, *On the Crown* 8)
 7.4. Petition to the Gods for a Fair Hearing and Justice in a Trial (3) (*paraklêsis, hiketeia*, Aeschines, *On the False Embassy* 180)
 7.5. Prayer for Destruction of Enemies (*euchê*, Demosthenes, *On the Navy* 39)

8. Philosophical Prayers

8.1. Prayer to Pan (*euchê*, Plato, *Phaedrus* 279b–c)
 8.2. Hymn to Zeus (*hymnos*, Cleanthes in: Stobaeus, *Anthology* 1.1.12)
 8.3. Hymn of Praise of the Great God (*euchê, euphêmia*, Epictetus, *Diatribes* 1.16.15–18)
 8.4. Submission to God's Will (Epictetus, *Diatribes* 2.16.41–43)
 8.5. Hymn to All the Gods (*hymnos*, Proclus, *Hymns* 4)
 8.6. Closing Prayer of Praise of God (Poimandres, in: *Corpus Hermeticum* 1.31–32)

9. Epigraphic Prayers, Curses

10. Prayers in Magical Texts

Bibliography

ROMAN AND ITALIC PRAYER

Area Editor: Eric Orlin

Introduction

1. Prayers Accompanying Rituals

1.1. Prayer for Purification of a Farm (*lustratio*, Cato, *De Agricultura* 141)

2. Prayers for Welfare of the Community

2.1. Prayer for Purification and Well-Being of an Etruscan Community (*lustratio*, Iguvine Tablets VIa1–VIb47)

2.2. Prayer from the Secular Games of Augustus (*CIL* 6.32362)

2.3. Prayers of the Arval Priests (*CIL* 6.32374)

3. Occasional Prayers

3.1. Prayer before Setting Off on Campaign (Livy 29.27)

3.2. Prayer for Oratorical Success in Litigation (Cicero, *In Verrem* 1.50)

3.3. Prayer of a Magistrate on Assuming Office on the First Day of the Year (Ausonius 3.5 [Loeb Classical Library 96:48])

3.4. Prayer Preceding Incubation for Dream-Divination (Hor Archive [O.Hor 13])

4. Vows

4.1. Vow of a Temple to Jupiter in Battle (Livy 1.12)

4.2. Vow to Devote Lives and Property of an Enemy to the Gods of the Underworld (*devotio*, Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 3.9.9–13)

4.3. Vow to Bring the Protective Deity of an Enemy to the Roman Side (*evocatio*, Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 3.9.7)

4.4. Vow for a Sacred Spring (*ver sacrum*) (Livy 22.10)

4.5. Vow to Confirm a Previous Votive Commitment (*Commendatio*, *AE* 2007, 00618)

5. Curses

5.1. Oscan Curse Tablet (*defixio*, *Le tabellae defixionum osche*, no. 1)

5.2. Prayer of a Briton for Justice against an Unknown Thief (*AE* 1988, 840)

5.3. “Prayer for Justice” Curse from Salacia, Spain (*AE* 2001, 1135)

5.4. Erotic Curse Tablet of Karpime Babbia (*Corinth* 18.6, 125–6)

6. Hymns

6.1. Hymn Performed at the Secular Games of Augustus (Horace, *Carmen Saeculare*)

6.2. Hymn of the Arval Priests (*CIL* 6.32388)

6.3. Literary Hymn to Diana (Catullus 34)

6.4. Hymnic Narrative of the Miraculous Deeds of Isis (aretology, *IK Kyme* 41)

6.5. Prose Hymn to Zeus (Aelius Aristides, *Regarding Zeus*)

7. Thanksgiving

7.1. Graffiti Verse Prayer of Thanksgiving to Hercules (*SEG* XLVII 1517)

7.2. Comedic Prayer of Thanksgiving (*supplicatio*, Plautus, *Persa* 753–58)

8. Prayers of Confession/Penitence

8.1. Prayer to Mes to Atone for Failure to Properly Obey the God (Confession Inscription, *Die Beichtinschriften Westkleinasiens*, 59)

9. Incantations

9.1. Acclamation to the Great Kore (Flusser, *IEJ* 25)

10. Dedicatory Inscriptions

- 10.1. Dedication of Altar to Augustus at Narbo (*CIL* 12.4333)
- 10.2. Municipal Dedication of an Altar to Jupiter at Salona (*CIL* 3.1933)
- 10.3. Graffiti Record of a Fulfilled Vow (*AE* 1981, 283)
- 10.4. Offering of a Gift to Hercules Bullatus (*CIL* 6.302)
- 10.5. Sepulchral Inscription with a Petition for a Deceased Spouse (*CIL* 3.7436)

11. Oaths

- 11.1. Oath for Declaring War (Fetial Oath, *Livy*, 1.32)
- 11.2. Literary Oath Ratifying a Peace Treaty (Vergil, *Aeneid* 12.176–94)
- 11.3. Oath of Allegiance to the Emperor (*IGRR* 4.251)

12. Amulets and Other Objects

- 12.1. Amulet for Protection against the Plague (Museum of London, inv. 941)

Bibliography

EARLY CHRISTIAN PRAYER

Area Editors: Harald Buchinger, Hermut Löhr, Ágnes T. Mihálykó, Gerard Rouwhorst

Introduction

1. Authoritative Model Prayer

- 1.1. The Lord's Prayer

2. Daily Prayers

- 2.1. Prayers for Night, Morning and Evening
- 2.2. Manichaeian Daily Prayer (*Prayer of the Emanations*, P.Kellis VI Gr. 98)

3. Weekly Prayers

- 3.1. Prayer for the Lord's Day
- 3.2. Thanksgiving Prayer for Sabbath and Sunday (Apostolic Constitutions 7.36)

4. Festival Prayers and Liturgical Year

- 4.1. Short Prayers for Mass on the First Sunday of Lent (Sacramentarium Gelasianum Vetus, nr. 104–106)
- 4.2. Blessing of the Easter Candle (*Exultet*)
- 4.3. Blessing of Palm and Olive on Palm Sunday (*Bobbio-Missale* 558)
- 4.4. Prayer for Feast of St. Cecilia

5. Sacred Meal (Eucharist)

- 5.1. Thanksgiving Prayers for Early Christian Meals (*Didache* 9–10)
- 5.2. Prayers for the Eucharist and for the Sick (P.Monts.Roca inv. 154b–156b)
- 5.3. Eucharistic Prayer of the Roman Rite (*Canon Romanus*, Gregorian Sacramentary 3–16)
- 5.4. Roman Prayers for the Eucharist (Gregorian Sacramentary)
- 5.5. Gaulish Prayers for the Eucharist (*Missale Gothicum*)
- 5.6. Byzantine Prayers for the Communion Rite

6. Initiation Rituals

- 6.1. Rite for Christian Initiation from Alexandria (Baptism, Aksumite Collection, fol. 51vb–53vb)

7. Petitionary Prayers

- 7.1. Jesus's Prayer for Protection for the Apostles and All Believers (John 17:1–26)

- 7.2. Prayer for Boldness to Preach (Acts 4:23–31)
- 7.3. Bishop's Prayer for the Church in Corinth and All Believers (1 Clem. 59–61)
- 7.4. Ektenies and Litanies

- 8. Prayers for Healing
 - 8.1. Admonition Concerning Prayers for Healing and Forgiveness of Sins (James 5:13–18)
 - 8.2. Georgian Version of the Blessing of the Oil of the Sick from Old Jerusalemite Euchologion (Sinait. Iber. 12 and Sinait. Iber. NF 53)
 - 8.3. Blessing of Oil of the Sick from Rome (Sacramentarium Gelasianum Vetus 382)

- 9. Prayers of Intercession Addressed to Saints
 - 9.1. Instruction on Prayers to Saints for Intercession (Origen, *On Prayer* 14.6)
 - 9.2. Prayer to St. Mary Concerning Forgiveness
 - 9.3. Request for Deceased Child to Intercede for Her Parents (Tomb of St. Sabina, Rome)

- 10. Selection and Performance of Psalms
 - 10.1. St. Benedict on the Use of Psalms in Monastic Prayer
 - 10.2. St. Cassian on the Performance of Psalms in Egyptian Monasticism
 - 10.3. St. Gregory of Nyssa on Psalm Titles
 - 10.4. Psalm 62 in Monastic Morning Prayer
 - 10.5. Psalm 141 in Monastic Evening Prayer
 - 10.6. Psalms in Cathedral Worship
 - 10.7. Antiphons, Doxologies and Responses Accompanying Psalms

- 11. Ordination to Christian Offices
 - 11.1. Prayer for the Ordination of a Bishop (Apostolic Tradition 3/Apostolic Constitutions 8:5)

- 12. Prayers of Thanksgiving
 - 12.1. Jesus's Thanksgiving for Revelation for the Disciples (Luke 10:21–24)
 - 12.2. Martyr's Prayer (Martyrium Polycarpi 14)

- 13. Doxological Prayers
 - 13.1. Hymn to Glorify God and Jesus Christ (Great Doxology, Codex Alexandrinus/ Apostolic Constitutions 7:47)

- 14. Byzantine Prayers for Special Occasions
 - 14.1. Prayer for the Churching of a Child (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Barberini Greek 336, nr. 113)
 - 14.2. Prayer for the Veiling of a Woman (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Barberini Greek 336, nr. 272)
 - 14.3. Prayer for the Dead (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Barberini Greek 336, nr. 264)
 - 14.4. Prayer in Time of Drought (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Barberini Greek 336, nr. 194)
 - 14.5. Prayer at the Occasion of an Earthquake (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Barberini Greek 336, nr. 233)

- 15. Literary Prayers
 - 15.1. Epistolary Prayer Report (1 Cor 1: 4–9)
 - 15.2. Concluding Doxology (Rom 16:25–27)
 - 15.3. Wish Prayer for Moral Excellence (1 Thess 5:23)
 - 15.4. Concluding Prayer for Welfare of Recipients and Doxology (1 Clem. 64)
 - 15.5. Macrina's Final Prayer (Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, ch. 24)
 - 15.6. Prayer for Salvation, Healing, and Revelation Attributed to the Apostle Paul (NHCI, 1)
 - 15.7. Augustine's Prayer for Finding God (Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1)

- 16. Short Prayer Formulae: Acclamations, Doxologies, Eulogies
 - 16.1. Amen

- 16.2. Maranatha
- 16.3. Kyrie Eleison
- 16.4. Hosanna
- 16.5. Trisagion
- 16.6. Short Blessings

17. Hymns

- 17.1. Mary's Song (Luke 1:47–55)
- 17.2. 17.2 Didactic Hymn about Christ (Phil 2:5–11)
- 17.3. Hymns of the Apocalypse of John
- 17.4. Hymns Meditating on Christ (Odes of Solomon)
- 17.5. Hymn Praising Christ (P.Köln IV 173)
- 17.6. Hymn of Seth to the Son, from the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* (NHC III, 2 and IV, 2)
- 17.7. Manichaean Psalm for the Departure of the Soul (Psalm 247, 2 PsB. 55.17–56.13)
- 17.8. Evening Hymn (*Phōs hilaron*)
- 17.9. Hymn for the Evening (Apostolic Constitutions VII: 48)
- 17.10. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymn from the Collection *On Church* (Madrasha, *On Church* 29)
- 17.11. Romanos the Melodist: Verse Sermon *On the Beheading of John the Baptist* (*kontakion*)
- 17.12. Hymn of Ambrose of Milan
- 17.13. Post-Classical Latin Hymn
- 17.14. Byzantine Troparia

18. Invocations of Divine Names

- 18.1. List of Invocations of Jesus (Acts of Thomas 47)
- 18.2. Jesus Prayer

19. Blessing of Material Objects

- 19.1. Georgian Version of the Water Blessing on Theophany from the Old Jerusalem Euchologion (Sinait. Iber. 12, 54 and 66 and Sinait. Iber. NF 53)
- 19.2. Blessing of Oil, Milk, Honey, Wool and First-fruits of Trees (*Canons of Hippolytus*, ch. 36)
- 19.3. Blessing of Apples (*Sacramentarium Gelasianum Vetus* 577/1603)

20. Apotropaic Prayers and Exorcisms

- 20.1. Psalm Verses in Inscriptions on Doorways and Clay Lamps
- 20.2. Apotropaic Amulet: Invocation of Michael and Other Archangels (lead leaf of Archaeological Museum of Nicosia, Cyprus, inv. 1939. IV. 3–1)
- 20.3. Funerary Inscription for Protection of Tombs
- 20.4. Psalm 80 (79) Used as a Prayer for Protection of Vineyards against Hailstorm (lead leaf from Rhodes; once State Museum of Berlin, misc. 8630)
- 20.5. Exorcism to Prevent Hailstorm (Plaque of Philadelphia)
- 20.6. Invocation of Bakthōtha for Protection against Impure Spirits (London, BL, Or. 5987)
- 20.7. Amulet for Iōannia against Fever (P.Oxy. VIII 1151)

21. Curses

- 21.1. Anathema of the 318 Nicene Fathers Used as a Curse
- 21.2. Prayer for Vengeance against Mariam, Kallinikos, and Others (IFAO Copte 451)
- 21.3. Spell for Separating a Couple (*diakopos*, P.Kellis Copt. 35)

22. Divination

- 22.1. Casting of Lots to Discern God's Will to Replace Judas (Acts 1:24–26)
- 22.2. Lot Book from Gaul (*Sortes Sangallenses*)
- 22.3. Gospel of the Lots of Mary

Bibliography

ZOROASTRIAN PRAYER

Introduction

1. Foundational Short Prayers

- 1.1. On Ahura Mazda (*Ahuna Vairya*)
- 1.2. On Truth (*Ashem Vohu*)
- 1.3. The Creed (*Fravarane*)

2. Hymns of Zoroaster (*Gathas*)

- 2.1. Wedding Song (*Vahishtoishi Gatha*)

3. Hymns and Prayers to Single Deities

- 3.1. Prayers Integrated in the Daily Duties (*Srōš Yašt*)
- 3.2. Great Hymns (*Ohrmazd Yašt*)
- 3.3. Short Prayer for the Sun (*Xawršēd Niyāyišn*)

4. Prayers of Praise

- 4.1. Praise of the Souls (*Stōm*)
- 4.2. Praise of the Ritual Drink (*Hōm Stōm*)

5. Prayers of Request

- 5.1. Pious Blessing (*Dahmā Āfrīti*)
- 5.2. Blessing for the Congregation and the Departed (*Āfrīnagān*)

6. Daily Prayers

- 6.1. Prayer for the Five Parts of the Day (*Hāwan Gāh*)
- 6.2. Prayer for the Care of the Fire (*Nērang ī Ātaxš*)
- 6.3. Prayers for the Ritual Garment (*kustī*-prayers)

7. Prayers of Confession (*Patets*)

8. Blessings (*tan-dorostī*)

9. Magic Prayers

Bibliography

ARABIAN AND EARLY ISLAMIC PRAYER

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Introduction

1. Pre-Islamic Prayers

- 1.1. North Arabian Prayers
- 1.2. Nabataean Prayers
- 1.3. Pre-Islamic Arabic Prayers
- 1.4. South Arabian Prayers

2. Mythical Prayers

- 2.1. Abraham's Prayer

3. Liturgical Prayers and Prayer Formulas of Affirmation and Praise

3.1. Prayers in *Sūrat al-Fātiha* (Q 1)

3.2. Creed or Affirmation of Faith (*tashahhud*)

3.3. Praise to God and Greetings (*hamdala, basmala, takbir, tasbīh, taslīm*)

3.4. Divine Blessings on Muhammad (*ṣalawāt*)

4. Occasional Prayers

4.1. Pilgrimage Prayer (*talbiya* or *labbayka*)

5. Petitionary Prayers

5.1. Prayers of Protection (Q 113 + Q 114)

5.2. Prayers of Forgiveness (*istighfār; rabbanā du‘ā*)

5.3. The Prayer for Rain (*ṣalāt al-istisqā’*)

6. Prayers for Forgiveness

6.1. Kumayl's Prayer for Forgiveness (*Du‘ā’ Kumayl*)

7. Mystical Prayer

Bibliography

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 (Humban-nikaš II), Tammarītu, Pa'ē, (and) Ummanaldašu (Humban-haltaš 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

¹ For an image of exemplar 5 (BM 124813), see 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 (Humban-nikāš II), the land Tammarītu, Pa'ē, (and) Ummanaldašu (Humban-haltaš 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-Tuba, 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, Pāē, and Ummanaldašu (Ḫumban-ḥaltaš 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, Pāē, (and) Ummanaldašu (Ḫumban-ḥaltaš 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, Bêl (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.²

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" (*ilūtiša rabīti*) rather than "your divinity" (*ilūtīki 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.

² 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 Individuals
Performers:	Inscriptions to be viewed and read out loud by passersby
Mode of Recitation:	
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” (*l̫b*), (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

Graffiti 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 Pinhas, son of Jeremiah, son of...” (all Aramaic)

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

“...Ahiah 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 Ahiah’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 Ahiah’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. Theodosius, 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 Theodosius, 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. Theodosius’ 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, Theodosius’ 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. Theodosius’ message intones “*theou eulogia*,” while Ptolemy’s begins with the phrase: “*eulogeit 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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