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A REFUGE OF THE SANHEDRIN

At Beit-Shearim, ten miles west of Nazareth, the Israel Exploration Society held on 3 September 1953 a full-scale press conference to publicise the results of N. Avigad's month of renewed excavation.¹ As the hospitality extended to the press corresponded to the importance of the discoveries, it seems opportune to detail here what may be of interest to Christian exegetes in this stopping-place of Judaism's supreme council in its gradual forced migration from Jerusalem to Tiberias.

The site is located on the Palestine survey (1:100000 Sheet 4 Zikhron) at the co-ordinates 16242359 under the name Khirbet Sheikh Bureik. It was commonly called Sheikh Abreq when its ancient remains were noticed by Alexander Zaid and thereupon excavated by Benjamin Maisler from 1936 to 1940.² Dr Maisler, who has since adopted the name of Mazar and become Rector of the Hebrew University, is known for his skilful excavation of Tell Qasileh, which he considers to be the site of Jaffa at the period when Solomon's cedars were conveyed up the Yarqon River there.³ In his campaigns at Sheikh Abreq, Maisler unearthed eleven great sepulchres or catacombs, some containing a hundred burials. Moreover the floor-level of a synagogue dated near A.D. 200 was found to be the largest known in Israel.⁴

These facts led the excavators to believe, at the suggestion of Professor S. Klein, that Sheikh Abreq must represent the site of the important Talmudic centre known as Beit Shearim, the Besara to which Josephus fled from Semûnia. This had been previously localised by Dalman at Jedda, some three miles east of Sheikh Abreq.⁵ Near Jedda in fact was founded a Sionist colony which continues to bear

¹ The Editor regrets the unavoidable delay in publishing this article. The reports were published in most Israeli newspapers on page 1 of Friday 4 September 1953; the account in *Ha-Aretz* is recommended. A. H. Elhanani in *Davar* avoids precision; the English account by Lucian O. Meyseis in *The Jerusalem Post* contains inaccuracies of detail.

² *Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society*, IV (1936), pp. 79-82; 117-118; V (1937), pp. 49-76; 77-97.

³ B. Maisler, *The Excavations at Tell Qasileh*, Jerusalem 1951; = *Israel Exploration Journal*, I (1950-1), pp. 61-76 (-83), 125-40, 194-218.

⁴ Description by Maisler in *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine*, IX (1942), 212-15; see also VI (1937), p. 222; VII (1938), pp. 51-3.

⁵ G. Dalman, "Nach Galiläa 1921", in *Palästina-jahrbuch*, XIX (1923), p. 38; he notes that Schwarz had claimed Tu'ran near Tabor is the Aramaic equivalent of Shearim. Adolphe Neubauer, *Géographie du Talmud*, Paris 1868, p. 200, had favoured Es-Sar'ah near Sepphoris. A map of these localities is given by Maisler in *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, XVIII (1938), p. 42; for the identification, see p. 41 and *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine*, IX (1942), p. 214: a broken marble plaque mentions [B]esar[a].

the name of Beit Shearim. But Maisler's discovery gained general acceptance,¹ and the "archaeological Beit Shearim" was indicated as such on the maps and guidebooks and began to draw crowds of interested tourists.

As is known, the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in A.D. 70 resulted in the suppression of the Sanhedrin in the form and competence with which it then existed, and the dominant Sadducean element disappeared from history altogether. But the authoritative Pharisees escaped to Yabne and there founded under Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai a Sanhedrin of canonical rather than political character, in which Rabbi Aqiba was the most conspicuous figure.² Aqiba's support of the rebel Bar-Kochba brought him a martyr's death and the dispersion of his Yabne community. On the day of Aqiba's death, but at a place unknown, there was born to Rabbi Simeon ben-Gamaliel II a son who was destined to be called "the Prince", Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, or in the Mishna "Rabbi" *simpliciter*, *par excellence*. Ha-Nasi is known to have spent his youth in Usha; this site is located seven miles east of Haifa, where a number of cave-tombs have yielded poorly preserved inscriptions. It may be presumed that this was the then see of the Supreme Council, where an important meeting was held.³ A few miles farther east is Shefar'am, which was also a centre of second-century Jewry, though the site is now a flourishing Arab-Christian town. Ha-Nasi studied under Yehuda ben-Ilai but not apparently under Meir, rabbis of this epoch known as Tannaïtes, an Aramaic word which means "composers of the Mishna", because from before Aqiba they were gradually editing the materials which ha-Nasi, last of the Tannaïtes, was to give final codification in the Mishna.⁴

Ha-Nasi succeeded to Hillel as head of the Jewish Council and at the beginning of his public activity transferred the patriarchate to Beit-Shearim. The Mishna treatise on the Sanhedrin (32b) declares, "To Beit Shearim must one go in order to receive Rabbi's decision on legal matters". Of his competence as a teacher nothing can be said more to his credit than to cite his justly famed admission, "I have learned much from my masters, more from my colleagues than

¹ Unaccountably A.-G. Barrois, *Manuel d'archéologie biblique*, Paris 1953, p. 2310, makes no mention of Beit-Shearim in alluding to Sheikh Abreq.

² Pierre Benoit, "Rabbi Aqiba ben Joseph" in *Revue biblique*, LVI (1947), p. 88; Emil Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*, Leipzig 1901, p. 1658; 1907 edn., p. 2442.

³ W. Bacher, "Judah I" in *Jewish Encyclopaedia*, VII (1907), pp. 333-7 gives the reference Gen. R. LVIII, Eccl. R. I.10, Bab. Kid. 72b for the birth of ha-Nasi. Compare Jelski, *Die innere Einrichtung des grossen Synedrions zu Jerusalem und ihre Fortsetzung im späteren palästinensischen Lehrhause bis zur Zeit des R. Jehuda ha-Nasi*, Breslau 1894.

⁴ The Aramaic root *tena* "repeat" corresponds to the Hebrew *šanaḥ*, as *tinyān*, Dan. II, 7; VII, 5 corresponds to *šenayim* "two".

from my masters, and more from my pupils than from all the others".¹

The large synagogue of Beit-Shearim where Yehuda ha-Nasi would have taught stands at the top of a knoll, facing Jerusalem. In it have been found some pieces of mosaic and other architectural ornaments. Immediately behind it to the north is another large public building erected under the Antonines, as is evidenced by the fine stonework of a corner-wall surviving to a height of several feet. The large squared blocks resemble the so-called Herodian masonry of the Jerusalem wailing-wall and Hebron patriarchal tomb, except that Herod's masons smoothed off the margins and left the boss rough, while the Antonines polished smooth also the boss of the visible surface. This building recalls that ha-Nasi was personally acquainted with the Antonine emperors: probably those who visited Palestine, Marcus Aurelius in 175 and Septimius Severus in 200. It is said that Rabbi owed his high position to the favour of these emperors, but the traditions about them may refer merely to their representatives in Palestine.²

To the west of the Antonine building stands a monumental gate whose investigation was one of the principal objectives of Avigad's campaign. Its remains show it to have been a most splendid and conspicuous example of this type of architecture. One might even suspect that it bears some relation to the Hebrew name *beit shearim*, which means "house of gates", though we will see that the catacombs offer plausible alternatives. The door-grooves of the city gate may be clearly seen; and inside the structure are several rooms, one of which contains a complex example of an olive-press.

Toward the north-west of the synagogue-knoll the ground falls away steeply, and along the sides and base of this bank are the Beit-Shearim tombs, of which more than a thousand have already been discovered. They include all the types of Jewish burial known to have been in use at the beginning of our era: arcosolia, *kokim*, pits; with and without ossuary; there are even wooden coffins and sarcophagi of lead, stone and pottery.³

The most imposing of the catacomb-entries is the one recently cleared by Avigad, just west of the monumental gate but at a considerably lower level. It has a high false façade, consisting of three Roman-influenced stone arches, not excavated into the soft rock hillside as one would expect but built up against it. Low in the middle arch is a small blocked-up doorway. Inside this tomb were found

¹ Makkot 10a; Epstein, *Babylonian Talmud*, London 1935, Seder Neziqin Makkoth, p. 65.

² Bacher in *Jewish Encyclopaedia*, VII (1907), p. 335.

³ Maisler in *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, XVIII (1938), p. 44.

inscribed the names Rabbi Simeon and Rabbi Gamliel without patronymic. The excavators announced that it was a known fact that Yehuda ha-Nasi was buried at Beit-Shearim and that he had two sons named Simeon and Gamliel. Obviously the reporters were expected to conclude that the 1953 campaign had discovered the burial-place of the two sons of ha-Nasi, but the excavators carefully dissociated themselves from this conclusion. Their prudent reserve is understandable when we recall the furore that was caused when a Berlin news-agency, reporting Sukenik's discussion of a first-century ossuary marked "Jesus son of Joseph", proclaimed that the genuine tomb of Christ had been found.¹ Like Joseph and the Hebrew name which may be rendered in English as Jesus or Josue or even Isaias, the names Simeon and Gam(a)liel were common among all classes of the people. It may be remarked, however, that Gamliel son of ha-Nasi is of great importance to the history of the Mishna, since it was he who took over the work which his father's death left unfinished, and it was he who inserted the numerous decisions of his father with the honorifically anonymous formula "Rabbi says".

In the same imposing mausoleum which contains the burials of "Simeon and Gamliel", other inscriptions more adequately identify two of the Amoraim, Simeon ben-Yohanan and Yudan bar-ha-Lewi. "Amoraim" is the name given to the generations succeeding ha-Nasi, last of the Tannaïtes. Whereas the Tannaïtes consisted only of six generations and few doctors, there are some three thousand Amoraim whose names are preserved.

A second catacomb discovered by Avigad is of even greater significance. It, too, is of striking architecture. It contains a central court from which several entrances lead off into various chambers. These entrances have stone doors, still in position, and of exquisitely skilful ornamentation. Already in the earlier-known catacombs there was one sample of a finely carved stone door. We cannot help wondering whether the name "House of Gates" is connected with these fine stone doors, or with the imposing triple arch just mentioned, rather than with the city gate. It must be considered more probable, of course, that the town already had its name before it acquired these architectural adornments.

This second catacomb was the richest in historical information in all fields available from its numerous *inscriptions*, as studied and described by Professor M. Schwabe of the Hebrew University. Artistically they are of comparatively little value, since most of them are painted casually in red ochre or scratched on to the soft stone, and not

¹ Hugues Vincent, "Építaphe prétendue de N.-S. J.-C.", in *Atti-Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, VII (1931), pp. 215-39.

centred or framed. They are in three languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek; the earlier campaigns mentioned some also in Palmyrene.¹ It was a most illuminating discovery that Greek outnumbers Semitic in the inscriptions in the proportion of five to one. Dr Schwabe declares that we had never hitherto realised the extent to which this highly judaising milieu had in fact been hellenised. We may point out, however, the passage of *Ṣotah* 49b where ha-Nasi himself proclaims that Jews of Palestine who do not know Hebrew should prefer to speak Greek rather than Aramaic; he considered it no more foreign, and more cultural. One bizarre *graffito* in this Beit-Shearim catacomb gives a schoolboy's credo, a sketched seven-branched candlestick as symbol of the Jewish faith, preceded by Greek letters forming the Hebrew words *egdal le-*: "I shall grow up for the Law!" Also of philological interest is the use of the Greek word *apsis* to designate the whole burial chamber as well as a single niche.

Several Aramaic inscriptions contain a curse against the tomb-opener, as in Shakespeare's epitaph.² The formula *sōf bîš* "a shameful end" is a regular postexilic one. But at Beit-Shearim it did not prevent the boring of large holes by ancient robbers who removed all the bones and all but a few glass and bronze utensils. Hence the archaeological booty left for modern pirates is negligible. But theologians will pounce upon the interesting presuppositions regarding the future life in the epitaph: "Him who alters the state of this woman, lo the one who raises the dead and gives them life, himself will judge".

The chief importance of the Beit-Shearim inscriptions is geographical. Personages were brought here for interment from Eilat (Aqaba), Babylon, Tadmor (Palmyra), Gebl (Byblos), Tyre. There is also "Euspidios son of Ammi, the gracious archisynagogos of the people of Beirut". Most engrossing is the inscription "Aidessios geroueiarch of Antioch". Aidessios "the Edessan" implies an incidental link with northern Syria. *Geroueiarchos* is considered by the excavators to be a legitimate mode of writing *gerousiarchos*: the iota is abusively written as the diphthong epsilon-iota (of similar pronunciation) and this epsilon is combined with the sigma (*c*); this is tantamount to deleting the sigma, as when a typist strikes an *e* over a *c*. Would it not be much simpler and just as satisfactory to say that *e* was just a mistake for *s*? The Hebrew University savants deduce from this inscription the hitherto-unknown fact that Antioch possessed a significantly large and

¹ *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine*, VII (1938), p. 51.

² Father Dyson kindly calls to my attention the two Sidon epitaphs of Tabnith and Eshmunazar, about 300 B.C., menacing the tomb-robber with exclusion from repose among the Rephaim; Cooke, *North-Semitic Inscriptions*, Oxford 1903, pp. 26, 30.

organised Jewish community.¹ But one might have perhaps inferred as much from the fact that it was the first city where members of a certain innovating Jewish sect became known as Christians, Acts xi.26. Indeed, those who first preached Jesus in Antioch are declared to have addressed themselves “*also to the Greeks*” Acts xi.20.

The conclusion which the excavators rightly draw from the toponymic galaxy of these epitaphs is that after Hadrian’s prohibition of Jewish burials at Josaphat in the Kedron valley, Beit-Shearim became the centre to which leaders of Jewry from the whole Middle East were brought for interment. Is there possibly in this fact also a plausible (though too tardy) origin of the name “House of Gates” . . . into Sheol? Surely the catacombs excavated in 1936–40, with their entrance through a cleft in the steep hillside, are not unlike the imagined entry of Virgil or Dante into the underworld.

As for the Sanhedrin, or its post-Jerusalem equivalent, it was not destined to remain here. Yehuda ha-Nasi himself was compelled in the interest of his health to spend the last seventeen years of his life at Sepphoris, a few miles north of Nazareth (claimed by uncertain tradition to have been the home of Joachim and Anne). We learn from *Ketuvot* 103b that Rabbi wanted to be buried at Beit-Shearim, and had prepared his tomb there; some authorities point out his tomb at Sepphoris; but undoubtedly he would have been laid to rest at the centre which his prestige had made the focal point of Eastern Jewry’s burials. Meanwhile the active teaching body of the Amoraim moved to Tiberias, where they were known to Jerome, and developed the system of vowel-points used in our Hebrew bibles today. Thereupon Beit-Shearim fell promptly out of existence. A statistic of coins found during the excavations shows that the occupation ceased before the revolution under Gallus in A.D. 352. Today Zionist colonists are bringing the House of Gates to life again.

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¹ C. H. Kraeling, “The Jewish Community at Antioch”, in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LI (1932), p. 130, also holds that “its significance for the development of rabbinical Judaism is minimal”; p. 148, “the period of prestige and prosperity which the Jews enjoyed at Antioch came to an end toward the middle of the first century A.D.”.