

Jewish Burial of Late Antiquity

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Abstract— What did Jewish burial in late Antiquity look like? In the middle ages, burial in plots of ground in cemeteries grew to become the prevalent method of burial and the method that is still dominant to this day. Yet, as we know from tradition, burial does not require the existence of cemeteries; after all our ancestors in Tanach & Talmud were buried in caves and underground tombs. So what did Jewish burial look like in Late Antiquity, specifically between the Biblical and Temple times and the Medieval Era? The development of Jewish burial practices spanned the entire Jewish diaspora and it took centuries to take shape, but by looking at the archeological findings of late antique burials we can come to understand what it meant to have a Jewish burial in late antiquity.

According to rabbinic Judaism there is a negative commandment against leaving the dead unburied.¹ In fact, even a high priest — who, normally, according to Jewish law, cannot become impure through contact with the body of the dead — is not only permitted, but, rather, is especially required to make himself impure. Specifically, he is obligated to involve himself in burying the *meit mitzvah*: the deceased individual who does not have anyone else to assist in the burial process.² What makes this commandment exceptional is that it is considered a *hessed shel emet*, or, a true act of kindness. By law, the burying of the deceased is altruistic for one acts with the understanding that the act will not be reciprocated by the individual since the person is incapable of such a deed.³ Although Jews in late antiquity did not fully adhere to rabbinic practice, they, like all other human beings, still had to grapple with the finality of life and the performative process following a person's passing.

In biblical times, ancient Israelites buried their dead in the earth. The Bible frequently recounts the burials of various individuals—most notably Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah in *Ma'arat Hamachpelah*, or, the Cave of the Patriarchs. Similarly to the account of *Ma'arat Hamechpelah*, most burials in biblical and, later, in the Temple period occurred in rock-cut tombs. The process followed specific steps: when a person died, their body was laid to rest in a carved out niche, and, after the body decayed, the bones were placed alongside those of past family members. This system of burial inspired the term “gathered to his people” when referring to someone's death in the Bible.⁴ Burying an individual twice was known as primary and secondary burial, respectively.⁵ It was also common that the bones of an individual were collected during secondary burial and placed into designated small chests referred to as ossuaries.⁶ Even after the destruction of the Second Temple, and the subsequent exile with the entire Jewish world being globally dispersed, the Jewish communities brought

¹ b. Sanhedrin 46a.

² b. Nazir 47b.

³ Rashi on Genesis 47:29

⁴ Genesis 25:8.

⁵ The Jewish Encyclopedia. “Burial.” New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1964.

⁶ Encyclopedia Judaica. “Ossuaries and Sarcophagi.” Jerusalem: Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972.

with them their mortuary traditions. Despite this attempt to preserve their heritage, external influences permeated within these communities, in turn, each community adopting, to varying degrees, non-Jewish burial practices. During late antiquity, specifically, between the third and fifth centuries of the Common Era, a wide range of burial rites were observed. Since “inconsistencies of available evidence have impeded the development of cohesive theories about death and burial among ancient Jews,” historians are forced to combine historical objects and sources in order to gain a better perspective on the varying burial practices of the Jewish communities.⁷

Under the modern streets of the city of Rome, Italy archeologists have uncovered five Jewish catacombs which are arguably the largest, most substantial source of knowledge for Jewish diasporic life of late antiquity.⁸ The significance of these catacombs is not that they contain many distinctive Jewish features, but, rather, that certain consistent characteristics indicate that the Roman culture influenced Jewish community’s burial practices: relating to how the community attempted to exist within the wider culture while concurrently holding on to their ancient traditions. This impact was most distinctly manifest in the catacombs’ inscriptions, particularly, the inclusion of Greek and Latin lettering. The decision to use the lingua franca rather than Hebrew or Aramaic, traditional languages of the Jewish communities, insinuates that the Jews of Rome did not only not speak their ancestral tongue, but did not even use them for ritual practice—of the inscriptions found attributed to the first through third centuries of the Common Era, 76% of them were either written in Greek or Latin.⁹ Beyond the inscriptions, the catacombs themselves are covered in Greco-Roman images and art. Adorning the walls and ceilings are pagan symbols such as *puttis*, a winged Roman angel, and the Greco-Roman Goddess Nike, depicted wearing a laurel wreath crown, a symbol for victory.¹⁰

Although the Roman Jews of this period clearly adopted aspects of the broader religio-cultural community, as seen through the catacombs, the Jewish communities still retained a discernible Jewish identity. Pagans practice typically including cremation of their dead; the Jewish community only buried their dead conforming to normative Jewish burial customs, including secondary burial in ossuaries.¹¹ The most prominent feature of the catacombs is that they were solely reserved for Jews – “of the Jews, by the Jews, for the Jews.”¹² Although the inscriptions were not written in Hebrew or Aramaic, the content of the inscriptions discuss the ten synagogues found throughout Rome.¹³ These synagogues had elected officials, evidenced by the luxurious titles provided on epitaphs.¹⁴ Furthermore, alongside the Greco-Roman artwork, Jewish images, most famously *menorahs*, the candelabras used in the Temple services, are prominently displayed throughout the burial site. Following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the symbol of the *menorah* came to commemorate its destruction and the subsequent exile of the Jewish people.¹⁵ The *menorah* marked the reality of Jewish identity in the Diaspora; the symbol stood to represent the loss of Jewish autonomy in the land of Israel and the lack of cohesion between communities as they were living as minorities within foreign lands. The catacombs of Rome highlights the embrace of Greco-Roman culture in the inhumation process while the simultaneous continuation of the Jewish tradition.

⁷ Stern, Karen B. Death and Burial in the Jewish Diaspora - Oxford Biblical Studies Online. December 23rd, 2020. <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/article/opr/t393/e30>.

⁸ Stern, “Death and Burial in the Jewish Diaspora”.

⁹ Rajak, Tessa. “The Jewish Diaspora in Greco-Roman Antiquity.” 146-162. Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology, vol. 72, no. 2, Apr. 2018.

¹⁰ Visotzky, Burton L. Aphrodite and the Rabbis: How the Jews Adapted Roman Culture to Create Judaism as We Know It. 207. St. Martin's Press, 2016.

¹¹ Rajak, 82.

¹² Visotzky, p. 207

¹³ Laurenzi, Elsa. Jewish Catacombs: The Jews of Rome: Funeral Rites and Customs. Gangemi Editore. 2013.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵ Visotzky, p.8.

An analysis of Venusia, a city located in southern Italy, reveals that the same pattern emerged in its Jewish community. The Jews in Venusia were outwardly Roman as shown by the physical construction of the catacombs according to Roman tradition rather than Jewish law, “even though the terrain made the latter entirely feasible.”¹⁶ The loculi engraved into the walls were used as the burial places for those of lower economic status, while those of higher status were buried in arched recesses called “*arcosolia*.”¹⁷ Furthermore, the epigraphs themselves are written in Greek and Latin, similar to the Roman catacombs, while others included Hebrew passages.¹⁸ In addition, these burial places were considered “longer, more elaborate and more descriptive.”¹⁹ The most well-known example is Faustina’s epitaph — Faustina being a first century Roman empress — which “discusses how two Apostles and two Rabbis spoke on behalf of her and established her lineage with prominent leaders of the community.”²⁰ These two apostles are believed to be representatives of the Patriarchate in Palestine. This suggests that the Jewish community of Venusia had formal relations with the established rabbinic Jewish community in the Near East despite not adhering to the fundamental principles and beliefs of rabbinic Judaism itself. The epitaphs also reveal that the community titles given to individuals in Venusia align with those found in the Roman catacombs such as “*gerousiarch*” which was given to Vitus: Faustina’s grandfather.²¹ Jewish images such as *lulavim* and *shofarot* can also be seen inside the catacombs of Venusia, with the most common image being *menorahs*, further demonstrating how the image of the *menorah* symbolized ancient Jewish identity in the diaspora.²² However, unlike the Roman catacombs, there is no artwork in the Venusian catacombs aside from the images on the epitaphs themselves.²³

Additionally, most names in the inscriptions are written in Latin characters as opposed to Semitic script suggesting that the Jews in Venusia “were not recent immigrants from Palestine or the eastern Mediterranean but people who had long been settled in a Latin-speaking environment.”²⁴ In Rome, most Jews had similarly since settled there — a Jewish presence can be traced back to the second century BCE — and many, in fact, became freedmen after having been brought over as slaves following the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135/136 CE, as evidenced by many Jews having double names.²⁵ Furthermore, most names were also Greek (31%) or Latin (46%) rather than Semitic in origin, which only account for 13% of the names in the inscriptions.²⁶ Similar to the case in Rome, the Venusian catacombs depict a Jewish community that appears Roman on the surface, but, at its core, is fundamentally Jewish, reflected by their traditional inscriptions and communal relations.

Curiously, one of the images of *menorahs* in the Venusian catacombs depicts a nine-branched *hanukkiyah* rather than the normative seven-branched *menorah* used in the Temple in Jerusalem.²⁷ In fact, we see a similar phenomenon on a tombstone in Zoar — on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea in Ghor es-Safi, Jordan — over a thousand miles away from Venusia.²⁸ In

¹⁶ Williams, Margaret. “The Jews of Early Byzantine Venusia: The Family of Faustinus I, the Father.” 39. *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, Apr. 1999.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Goodenough, Erwin Ramsdell. *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*. [New York], 1953.

¹⁹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*. “Epitaphs.” Jerusalem: Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972.

²⁰ Rothman, Bryan. *Epitaphs from the Venusian Jewish Community*, 2020.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Goodenough, 53.

²³ Goodenough 53.

²⁴ Williams, Margaret. “The Jews of Early Byzantine Venusia: The Family of Faustinus I, the Father.” 78. *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, Apr. 1999.

²⁵ Rajak, 104.

²⁶ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Catacombs”.

²⁷ Noy, David. *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*. 78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

²⁸ Sussman, Varda. “A Candelabrum on a Tombstone from Zoar.” *Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 33, no. 3/4, Israel Exploration Society, p. 231–34.

Zoar one finds the Jewish funerary iconography like *lulavim* and *menorahs* that exist elsewhere in late antiquity Jewish burial sites. However, there are also a plethora of non-Jewish images present such as the cross and the chi rho monogram.²⁹ Among the “over [350] inscribed tombstones from the 4th-6th centuries C.E.” found in the city of Zoar, only 70 of them are of Jewish origin, the rest being Christian.³⁰ Here, one can find Jews and Christians burying their dead in the same burial location, a unique aspect distinct to Zoar Jewish burial practice.

According to the Babatha documents, a satchel of legal documents from the 2nd century CE discovered in 1960, Zoar was “known as a place where Jews and non-Jews lived side by side.”³¹ Many scholars understand the shared presence of both Jewish and Christians tombstones as a result of the close relations between Jews and non-Jews in the community. Moreover, the Jewish and Christian tombstones are almost identical as “they are made of the same local sandstone, cut in similar dimensions, and they generally use similar writing techniques (engraving and/or red paint), similar geometrical frames, and similar abstract ornamentation.”³² Just as in Rome and Venusia, Jewish burials in Zoar outwardly appear consistent with the local customs of the area; Jews were buried with non-Jews and the tombstones were aesthetically similar. In reality, “in Zoar of late antiquity, there were no fuzzy boundaries between Christianity and Judaism.”³³ As such, it is not difficult to determine which tombstones are Jewish and which ones are not. For example, in addition to the Jewish iconography, Jewish tombstones were written in Aramaic while the Christian tombstones were written in Greek, with few notable exceptions.³⁴ Unlike the Roman and Venusian catacombs where the Jewish inscriptions were written in Latin and Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic, the Jews of Zoar intentionally used Hebrew and Aramaic as a means of differentiation — a byproduct of the shared space. Steven Fine, a historian of Judaism at Yeshiva University, makes the claim that this type of Aramaic can only be sourced to Jewish practice:

“Most of the Jewish ones are inscribed in a dialect of Aramaic known to scholars as Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, which was understood by Aramaic speakers, Jews and non-Jews, Samaritans, Christians or Arabs, when spoken. But these Jewish tombstones were inscribed in the square Aramaic script (shared with Hebrew) that was unique to Jews at this time. Thus only Jews could read these inscribed tombstones. They were internal documents, readable almost exclusively by Jews familiar with the Jewish script.”³⁵

Furthermore, “many Biblical names were used by the Jews of Zoar as reflected on the tombstones, among them Jacob, Saul, Judah and Esther,” standing in stark contrast to the names found in Rome and Venusia.³⁶ However, the Hebrew word *shalom* and the community titles mentioned in Zoar like *archsynsagogos* and “rabbi” are the same titles as those found on inscriptions in Rome and Venusia, respectively.³⁷

The Jews of Zoar further distinguished themselves from their Christian counterparts by dating their inscriptions using the Jewish calendar rather than the Julian calendar. However, while they did use a lunar calendar, it was not identical to the one used by the rabbinic community. While the Jews of Zoar did intercalate the second month of Adar and referred the second month as *Marcheshvan*, as the rabbis did in the Mishnah and Talmud, they did not

²⁹ Stern, 158.

³⁰ Wilfand, Yael. “Aramaic Tombstones from Zoar and Jewish Conceptions of the Afterlife.” 513-540. *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, vol. 40, no. 4-5, 2009.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 513.

³² Stern, 159.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*, 158.

³⁵ Fine, 56.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁷ Laurenzi, 36.

structure their calendar according to the fixed precepts found in rabbinic practice.³⁸³⁹ Historically, in certain years the community celebrated Passover before the spring equinox and celebrated Rosh Hashanah on days of the week forbidden by the Rabbis.⁴⁰ Moreover, there is no clear link between the burial practices in Zoar and rabbinic practices; in fact, including a person's date of death was a very uncommon custom in Jewish burial practices of late antiquity.

Historians previously believed that North African Jewish burial practices, specifically in Gammarth, Tunisia followed Palestinian rabbinic thought.⁴¹ The loculi in Gammarth were carved perpendicularly, as prescribed in the Mishnah and Talmud, rather than parallel to the walkways found in the catacombs of Rome and Venusia.⁴²⁴³ While this does not definitively indicate a connection, as this also parallels regional practices, there exist other correlations between Rabbinic practice and Jewish burial at Gammarth. Alfred Louis Delattre proposed that the Gammarth catacombs were built outside of the town to “separate the dead from the living,” in line with Rabbinic practice.⁴⁴ Karen Stern contests that “burial on the outskirts of town [was] conventional among Africans from earlier antiquity through the Vandal conquest” and there has been no careful excavation to corroborate Delattre's claims.⁴⁵ She believes that the Jewish burial in Gammarth reflected local practices rather than being entirely distinct from it. For example, the artwork found in Gammarth, such as “human figures, typical stylistic motifs, as well as boat imagery and viticulture sequences,” is typical of local North African practice and exists in other pagan and Christian burial sites.⁴⁶ Even the menorahs in Gammarth — normally used by scholars as benchmarks to recognize the existence of a Jewish identity in its users — in fact suggest that Jewish identity in Gammarth was fluid and not separated from its surroundings as many menorah images are part menorah and part cross.

“Maximally, combinations of the menorah and cross indicate the degree to which some people saw it as possible, appropriate, and desirable to identify simultaneously with the multiple gods and practices that the two images signify. Minimally, they indicate that though distinct Christian groups used these symbols, those Jews who rendered these images were not disturbed by this. They may not have been sensitive to the cross's integration into the structure of the menorah, or to variations in the menorah itself.”⁴⁷

Clearly, Jewish tradition in Gammarth closely aligned with local practices, yet there still existed a discernible Jewish identity amongst the Jews of Gammarth. Despite Jewish naming practices also largely reflecting the general trends of the culture, one can still locate “Jewish” names on inscriptions. Names were used to “index a distinct cultural milieu” and most noticeable is the posthumous use of “*Judaeus*” on tombstones to mark an individual as Jewish.⁴⁸⁴⁹ Therefore, just as in Rome, Venusia, and Zoar, although Jewish identity in Gammarth appears to be outwardly like the surrounding culture; nevertheless, the Jews in Gammarth maintained a distinct Jewish identity exhibiting similar characteristics to other Diasporic Jewish groups.

Through late antiquity, Jews in the diaspora lived amongst various cultures, but there still almost always existed certain common characteristics that defined Jewish identity and burial.

³⁸ Stern, 173.

³⁹ m. Taanit 1:3-4, b. Pesachim 94b.

⁴⁰ Stern, 176-177.

⁴¹ Stern, 256.

⁴² Bava Batra 6:8 & b. Bava Batra 100b-102b.

⁴³ Stern, 256, 297.

⁴⁴ b. Bava Batra 2:9.

⁴⁵ Stern, 298.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 288.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 273.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 135.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 122.

Some common characteristics of Jewish burial included Jewish images such as *lulavim* and *shofarot* — with the most helpful icon to distinguish Jewish identity being the menorah — and the Hebrew word “*Shalom*.” However, regional influences were much more overt than Jewish ones. In Zoar, inscriptions were written in Aramaic and Hebrew rather than Greek or Latin and in Gammarth inscriptions were written in the various languages spoken in the wider region.⁵⁰ Furthermore, only some Jewish communities buried their dead in specifically Jewish cemeteries. As we see in Venusia, there seems to be a strong connection between the Palestinian Patriarchate and local Jews despite them not fully adhering to dogmatic Rabbinic ideology and rules. Furthermore, even in Zoar and Gammarth where Jewish practice aligned with dogmatic Jewish practices, the Jews of Zoar and Gammarth did not fully conform with Rabbinic practices. Jews identified themselves differently depending on the local cultures surrounding them yet simultaneously blended in with the local culture, thereby making it difficult for scholars to identify a singular Jewish footprint. There were not many common Jewish benchmarks, but each Jewish community, almost without fail, imprinted their uniquely Jewish customs and culture onto their burial practices.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 192.