

INTRODUCTION

The Mishna in Avoda Zarah 3:4 relates the following tale:

Proklos the son of Philosophos asked Rabban Gamliel in Akko while he was bathing in the Bathhouse of Aphrodite, and said to him: “It is written in your [book of] Law, ‘And there shall cleave nought of the devoted thing to thine hand’ [Deut. 13:18]. Why then do you bathe in the Bathhouse of Aphrodite?” He answered: “One may not reply in the Bathhouse” [i.e. speak words of Torah while naked]. And when he came out he said: “I came not within her limit, she came within mine!” They do not say, “Let us make a bath for Aphrodite,” but “Let us make an Aphrodite as an adornment for the Bathhouse.” Moreover, even if they would give much money you would not enter before your goddess naked or after suffering a pollution, nor would you urinate before her! Yet this goddess stands at the mouth of a gutter and everyone urinates in front of her. It is written: “Their gods” [Deut. 12:3] only; hence, that which is treated as a god is forbidden, but what is not treated as a god is permitted.

It is by no means certain that this text relates a historical fact. But surely it reflects second-century *sitz im leben*, in which Jews and Gentiles, even most distinguished Jewish individuals, could bathe together naked in a Romano-pagan bathhouse, which apparently constituted a meeting place for the social intercourse of people from radically different walks of life.¹ And presumably they could converse together in Greek; or was it in Hebrew or Aramaic?

Furthermore, in Ruth Rabba to Ruth 1:8, we are told how R. Meir went

1 See Joseph Geiger, “Talmud ve-Historiah Attica – Mikzoah Ehad o Shtaim,” *Historiah* 11, 2003, pp. 16-17, and, on the bathhouse, see my *The City in Roman Palestine* (New York – Oxford 1998), pp. 58-72.

to console Oenomaus of Gadara² on the decease of his father and mother. In which language did they converse? Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic? Geiger³ points out that that city of Gadara was the birthplace of Meleagros; it was the city from which Rabbi Judah the Prince permitted the inhabitants to go down to Hamath, etc. (T. Eruvin 7 ad fin., and Y. Eruvin 5, 22d), and that he himself visited it, presumably to bathe in its hot springs (Y. Kiddushin 3, 64c, Y. Avoda Zara 3, 45b, *ibid.* 2, 40a, d); in that same city, Oppian relates how two neoplatonic philosophers visited its baths;⁴ in its synagogue there were Aramaic inscriptions, and its empress Eudocia herself wrote a poem containing Homeric turns of phrase that has survived in an inscription.⁵ In such a multicultural venue, Jews and Gentiles, Sages and philosophers must surely have met, socially at the baths, by chance in the market place, or even culturally in the forum. What were their main means of discourse? To what extent were they aware and knowledgeable of each other's religion, philosophy, legal system, language and culture in general?⁶

2 See S. Lieberman's comment in his seminal article "How much Greek in Jewish Palestine?" in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altman (Cambridge, Mass. 1963), pp. 129-30.

3 Geiger *ibid.* p. 17.

4 Eunapius 459.

5 J. Green and Y. Tzafir, "Greek Inscriptions from Hamat Gader. A Poem by the Empress Eudocia and Two Building Inscriptions," *IEJ* 32, 1982, pp. 77-96.

6 We can, of course, further expand this question by referring to the many dialogues found in rabbinic literature between rabbis and their non-Jewish counterparts. In which language did these dialogues take place? Thus, for example, rabbinic literature contains close to twenty such dialogues between R. Yose ben Halafta and a lady called *matrona*, surely a Roman aristocratic personality. The question, however, becomes more complex since there is no unanimity amongst the scholars as to whether she was Roman or Jewish. Furthermore, these dialogues are found in different, often parallel, sources, Genesis Rabba, Leviticus Rabba, Numbers Rabba, Tanhuma, etc., and it is not always clear which is the original version and has been editorially developed, which represent a second-century tradition – the time of R. Yose ben Halafta – and which from a much later period, when the editors reworded the text.

There is a considerable literature on the subject, and we shall list the main articles dealing with it: T. Ilan, "Matrona and Rabbi Yose: An Alternative Interpretation," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* XXV/1, 1994, pp. 18-51; M.D. Herr, "The Significance of the Dialogues between Jewish Sages and Roman Dignities," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22, 1971, pp. 146-50; F. Böhl, "Die Matronanfrage im Midrasch," *Frankfurter judaistische Beiträge* III, 1975, pp. 29-64; G. Gershönzon, E. Slomovic, "A Second Century Jewish-Gnostic Debate. Rabbi Jose ben Halafta and the Matrona,"

In yet another review article,⁷ Joseph Geiger comments as follows:

The total disappearance of Jewish Greek Literature after the Bar-Kohba rebellion is one of the more enigmatic phenomena of Jewish history in the Roman Empire. Since there is no telling whether indeed no such literature came into being or whether we are misled by the paucity and randomness of our sources, any evidence for the existence of such literature is of some importance. Was the practice of medicine by Jews in Palestine accompanied by medical literature composed in Greek? There exist some indications for the existence of such a literature. The great doctor Rufus of Samaria, some of whose medical treatises survive in Arabic translations, was, according to Galen – who may not have distinguished between Jews and Samaritans – a Jew; as to whether the doctor Solomon was a Jew or a Christian depends largely on the date of the pseudo-Galenic treatise in which he is mentioned.... Less well known is the Jewish doctor Domnus, the teacher of the iatrosophist Gessius from Petra in Arabia, and thus an iatrosophist himself. If so, he may have been engaged in medical writing....⁸

One can, I believe, safely assume that these writings were in Greek. Was then the knowledge of Greek on the part of Jews in rabbinic Palestine limited to Sages, doctors, and the elite professionals? Or were the farmers, the market hucksters, the urban artisans also familiar with the language, or at least a smattering of it?

This study attempts to address some of these questions. Although mainly philological in its methodological approach, our findings have broader cultural implications. Our research bases itself on the foundation laid by our great predecessors, Samuel Krauss, Saul Lieberman and others. Hopefully we have succeeded in building another storey on their foundations. For those who follow, there is much room for additional storeys – philological, historical and cultural.

Journal for the Study of Judaism XVI, 1985, pp. 1-41; Rivka Raviv, *Sippur ha-Dialog bein R. Yose ben Halafta la-Matrona – bein Bereshit Rabba le-va-Yikra Rabba, Sidra*, 2008, pp. 121-32, etc. These studies are more interested in the contents of the dialogues – Jewish-Christian, Jewish-Gnostic, Jewish-Jewish – than their linguistic contents.

7 “Cleopatra the Physician,” *Zutot*, 2001, pp. 28-32. This is an additional comment on M. Bar-Ilan’s extensive essay on “Medicine in Eretz Israel during the First Century C.E.,” *Cathedra* 91, 1999, pp. 31-78 [Hebrew, English abstract p. 181].

8 *Ibid.* p. 32, with bibliography.