



Cursing Beyond the Grave: Imprecations and Jewish Funerary Culture in Antiquity

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ABSTRACT This article discusses curses found in ancient and late antique Jewish funerary inscriptions. It begins with a typology of imprecatory texts based on a survey of funerary epigraphy, both Jewish and non-Jewish. It proceeds with an analysis of explicit curse formulae found in a Jewish funerary context: on ossuaries, on the walls of burial caves, or on architectural elements of graves. The article discusses several aspects of these curses, placing them in a physical, religious, and psychological context.

KEYWORDS Funerary epigraphy, Jewish curses, Jewish epitaphs

Introduction

Graves are liminal spaces. They serve as points of contact between the dead and the living who are left behind to bury them, as homes to people who no longer are real people but human remains, as places of memory and forgetting. The inherent liminality of graves has turned them—and their contents—into a subject of fascination for scholars and lay people alike, for a variety of reasons. Not only can funerary spaces teach us about the lives and beliefs of the living—who are responsible for their creation—but they also appear to serve as gates into the world of the dead. It is this latter aspect that resulted in ritual practices well known to every scholar of magic, namely the performance of aggressive magic and the burial of curse texts in cemeteries (and Graeco-Roman *defixiones* are just one of many examples, which cover a broad geographical and chronological spectrum). However, curses are related to funerary spaces in additional ways. They are sometimes included in the funerary inscription and directed towards those who may wish to manipulate the contents or space of the tomb. [1]

My article will discuss curses and related texts found in ancient and late antique Jewish funerary inscriptions. The sources examined for this aim will not be limited to a specific geographical setting, but rather refer to Jewish traditions around the ancient world. It will be interesting to observe the variation in such practices in accordance to geographical location. [2]

This discussion of funerary imprecations ought, however, to be preceded by a brief historical introduction on the general concept of cursing. In Antiquity, curses had a social as well as [3]

a ritual dimension, and could be performed with protective ends in mind, as well as for sheerly destructive ones. Various religious traditions assigned the cursing of enemies to the religious authorities, which resulted in a ritual practice that was officially approved rather than rejected.¹ Additionally, one may note the “socially constructive use of curses” (Faraone 2002, 77), in which political and legal transactions and processes were reinforced through self-cursing rituals and oaths. Third, as will also be shown below, some curses in Antiquity included a judicial aspect, turning them into a “prayer” for justice or revenge. Such curses were meant to bring to divine justice individuals who could not be targeted by the regular, human judicial system. Here, too, the curse was not a subversive or prohibited practice, but operated within the sanctioned social norms. One ought to understand the ancient imprecatory horizon as a complex one, moving between the individual to the society, between the sanctioned to the prohibited, and between protection to destruction.

The first step in analysing the role of imprecations in Jewish funerary culture is to assess the different types of curse texts found in funerary contexts. A survey of Jewish funerary epigraphy reveals three main types of imprecation-related texts:² [4]

- A. Curses targeting one or more individuals believed to have caused the death of the person buried beneath the epitaph; [5]
- B. Appeals against the violation of the grave.³ These texts do not include an actual imprecation, although it is possible that one was implied;
- C. Curses targeting potential violators of the grave.

This article focuses on type C curses, while the other two types remain the subject of future publications. They will be, however, briefly discussed here, for the following reasons. Curses of the first type, A, are relevant to a discussion of funerary imprecations due to their location in funerary contexts and the conceptual implications entailed. Curses of type B are relevant here due to their content and aim (protecting the grave from violation), which are similar to those in type C. [6]

The article will begin with a general introduction on funerary imprecations, after which I will move on to analyse the nature of these imprecations in Jewish contexts, raising some previously unexplored questions. Ultimately, I will attempt to reach some conclusions about the connection between imprecatory practices and Jewish funerary culture in Antiquity and Late Antiquity. [7]

1 See Frankfurter (2005) for a comparative overview of the concept, and for examples from different religious traditions, see the articles in Frankfurter (2019), e.g., Dieleman on Egyptian curses (103–12); Harari on ancient Judaism (esp. 148–61); Eidinow on binding spells, especially Graeco-Roman (351–87). Additional discussions of curses and aggressive magic in general in Judaism can be found in Bohak (2008), e.g.: 123–35, 144–7, 320–1, 401–6.

2 For an excellent introduction to Jewish epigraphy, see Van der Horst (2015). For brief overviews of curses in Jewish funerary contexts, see Van der Horst (1991, 54–60) and Hachlili (2005, 494–507). More specific discussions can be found in Strubbe (1994). For funerary curses in a broad historical perspective, the work of Parrot (1939) remains irreplaceable. A good contextualization of ancient Semitic curses, including funerary ones, can be found in Gevirtz (1961). Curses found in a funerary context in the Graeco-Roman world are discussed in a number of works; see, e.g., Strubbe (1991) and Strubbe (1997) for polytheistic Greek epitaphs in Asia Minor; Chaniotis (2004) for prayers for revenge in epitaphs; Rebillard (2009, 57–88) for tomb violation and related curses in Late Antiquity.

3 In this article I employ the terms “violation” and “violators” to refer to the misappropriation of the grave space or materials. They do not refer to defacing the grave or defiling it, for instance by persons relieving themselves in the vicinity of the grave (the “cacatum currat” feared by Trimalchio in the *Satyricon*, for which see below). For a terminological discussion with further references, see Brent (2020, 131–34).

Funerary Curses

It is possible that the inclusion of curses on funerary inscriptions was meant not only as a deterrent, meant to be read by human eyes, but that the liminality of the grave also played a part here. As suggested below, in the section “Questionable curses,” the people who inscribed these imprecations might also have had a non-human audience in mind. In this sense, the funerary curses of type C could be similar to magical practices and texts performed and located in the proximity of Graeco-Roman graves, such as the *defixiones*. If so, it could be that some Jewish grave-side rituals included oral curses against potential tomb violators, with the liminal location of the ritual serving as a factor in its potency. [8]

Jewish Prayers for Revenge

The first type of texts mentioned above, type A, is commonly included under the heading “prayers for revenge” when it is discussed within a Graeco-Roman context. This category was established by Henk Versnel in a series of seminal articles, beginning with the famous “Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers” (Versnel 1991) and further refined during the years that followed (for a survey of later articles, see Versnel 2010). Several such examples survive from a polytheistic and Christian context, in which the relatives or friends of the deceased blame the death on unnatural causes—be these aggressive magic or plain murder—but have no legal means of pursuing the alleged guilty party (Chaniotis 2004, 9–11 with further references). Hence, they resort to divine justice, and express their desire for revenge in writing on the epitaph of the prematurely departed. I am familiar with only two Jewish epitaphs from this period that conform to the definition of “prayer for revenge,” and they will be discussed below.⁴ [9]

The two inscriptions were uncovered on the Greek island of Rheneia, next to Delos. These are two nearly identical texts, incised on rectangular marble plaques (see fig. 1). Each stele was inscribed on both sides with the same text, meaning they could have been read no matter where one was standing. The texts are written in Greek and they have been dated variously from the second century BCE to the first century CE. They commemorate two girls or women, named Heraklea and Marthine. The inscriptions were discovered in the late nineteenth century, and, given their peculiarities, have been analysed by numerous scholars (references and commentary: *IJO* I: 235–42, texts Ach70, Ach71; Van der Horst and Newman 2008; Salvo 2012, 237–45). Some have suggested that these are actually Samaritan, not Jewish, texts, considering the attestations of a Samaritan presence on Delos. Determining the religious affiliation of such inscriptions is often difficult. In this case, the only link to Judaism is found in the appeal to “the God Most High,” as well as several references to the Hebrew Bible, such as the day when “every soul humiliates itself,” which may be a reference to the Day of Atonement. It is nevertheless remarkable that some Jews (or possibly, Samaritans) employed “prayers for revenge” in their epitaphs, even if this is the only attestation thereof. The translation below is from Salvo (2012, 237). [10]

I invoke and entreat the God Most High,⁵ the Lord of the spirits and all flesh (Θεὸν τὸν ὑψιστον τὸν κύριον τῶν πνευμάτων καὶ πάσης σαρκός), against those who [11]

4 A comparison between these Jewish (or Samaritan) prayers for revenge and other, non-Jewish ones, remains the subject of future research. Some similar notions in the context of biblical Jewish and Christian literature have been explored by Morrow (2016).

5 For the “God most high” (Θεὸς τὸν ὑψιστος), see Belayche (2011), with previous literature.

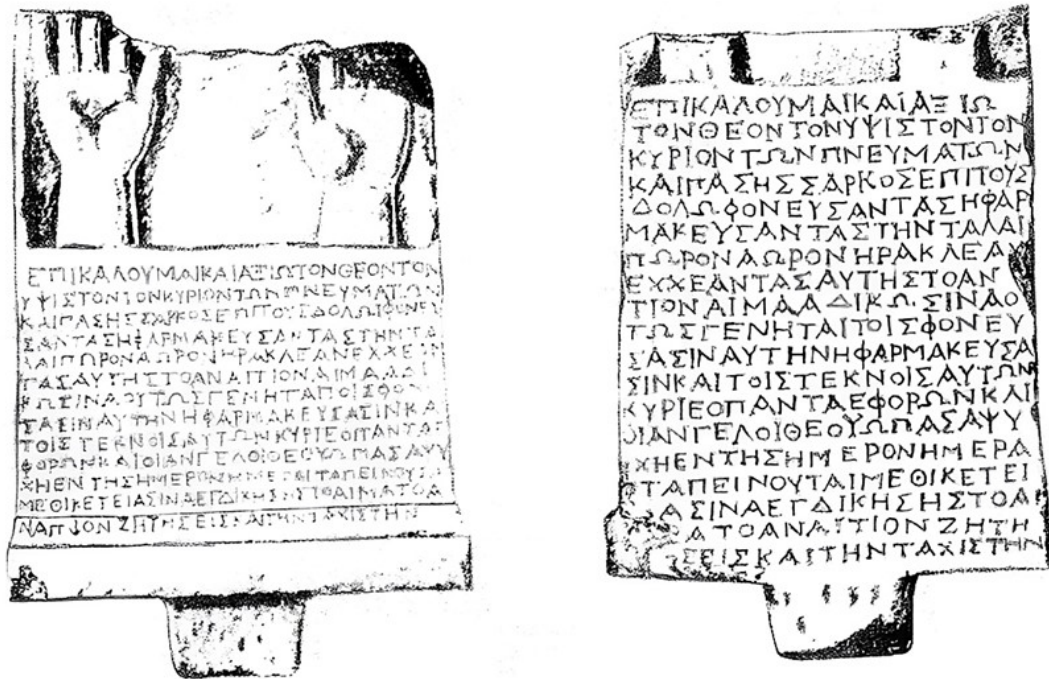


Figure 1 Jewish (or Samaritan) “prayer for revenge” for the death of Heraklea. Rheneia, Greece. After *IJO* I: 236.

have treacherously murdered or poisoned (φονεύσαντας ἢ φαρμακεύσαντας) the miserable untimely Heraklea, and shed unjustly her innocent blood, that the same may happen to them who have murdered or poisoned her, and to their children. O Lord, you who see everything, and you angels of God, for whom every soul humiliates itself on the present day with supplication (ὧ πᾶσα ψυχὴ ἐν τῇ σήμερον ἡμέραι ταπεινοῦτα[ι] μεθ’ ἱκετείας), that you may avenge the innocent blood, may investigate, and as soon as possible.

It is interesting to see that the persons who composed the epitaph did not resort to a typical “prayer for justice,” but included in it elements from their own religious world, through allusions to the Hebrew Bible and the (probable) mention of a major holiday, the Day of Atonement. These cultural-religious idiosyncrasies will become apparent also in other texts examined in this article, as will be pointed out below. When reading the Rheneia inscriptions, one needs to ask what the relationship between the two girls/women was. Were their deaths connected in any way, or was this a fixed formula to be employed by Jews (or Samaritans) seeking divine revenge for an unusual death? [12]

Among the Graeco-Roman epitaphs that have been published thus far, several dozen contain prayers for revenge, usually in the context of an untimely death, just as in the case of Heraklea and Marthine. And yet, these are the only inscriptions alluding to a Jewish origin of the commemorators. Much later expressions of a desire for divine justice can be found in medieval Jewish epitaphs requesting that the Lord avenge the blood of the deceased. It should be noted, however, that these texts usually do not appear in the form of a curse. For example, two Hebrew epitaphs from Spain, uncovered at Puente Castro in the city of León and dated to the [13]

eleventh century, commemorate men who had been murdered. Each of these includes the request “May the Lord/may God avenge his blood.”⁶

These later texts are not, properly speaking, curses, but Jewish “prayers for revenge” addressed to God. It is intriguing that only two Jewish (or perhaps Samaritan) curses coupled with “prayers for revenge” have come down to us from Graeco-Roman Antiquity and Late Antiquity. However, it is also important to recall the fact that most Jews in the Graeco-Roman world bore Greek and Latin names. This, incidentally, is also exemplified in the two Rheneia inscriptions adduced above. Hence, if a Jewish person had chosen to inscribe a revenge curse on an epitaph and employ a typical Greek or Latin formula, such a text would be undistinguishable in the epigraphic record from non-Jewish curses. [14]

Protection Appeals in Jewish Funerary Texts

Moving to the second type of texts, namely appeals for protection (type B), one may note that they are directed against the manipulation of the grave, the human remains it contained, or the inscription/monument placed above them. In the scholarly literature there sometimes is a conflation between such appeal texts and curses (Strubbe 1991, esp. 33–35)—despite the fact that most appeals for protection do not include an imprecatory note, at least not an explicit one. Of this type of text several Jewish examples survive. Some of them derive from Asia Minor, some from Palestine, and others from Italy. Chronologically, they range approximately from the first century BCE to the fifth century CE. [15]

Protection appeals may be further subdivided into three subcategories. The first among these is the simplest or most elementary one, stating merely “Do not open.” It can be found on both primary and secondary burials, meaning ossuaries. Texts in this subcategory remain silent about the eventual consequences that will befall someone who *does* open the grave. The second subcategory of protection appeals states that should anyone open the grave or bury in it another person instead of its lawful owner (or current resident), they will undergo certain penalties. These penalties typically refer to a monetary fine, to be paid to a particular institution. The institution may be either a civic or a religious one, such as the Roman treasury or the Jewish synagogue. Lastly, the third subcategory of protection appeals lists as consequences for opening or manipulating a grave a rather abstract dealing with the divine law. In this sense, the third subcategory is closest in nature to an imprecation, as will be shown below. In what follows I will list some examples illustrating each subcategory as found in a Jewish context. [16]

“Do not open”: Simple Protection Appeals

This is the simplest and most succinct form of appeal for the protection of the grave. It does not specify a curse, nor does it employ threats, either with a monetary fine or by making recourse to supernatural or human powers. Instead, these formulae merely state that the funeral space (tomb or ossuary) should not be opened. What would happen if it were remains to be imagined. [17]

The first example is an Aramaic inscription that was painted in red on plaster, within a rectangular frame, above a rock-cut tomb in Jerusalem, in the Kidron Valley (see fig. 2). It was dated by the excavators to the first century CE. It states (Sukenik 1935: 193–5; *CIIP* I.I: text 460): [18]

6 For a discussion and additional examples, see Saar (2023); see Morrow (2016) for some liturgical parallels.



Figure 2 Painted inscription above loculus in a burial cave, Kidron Valley, Jerusalem. After Sukenik (1935).

This sepulchral chamber (כוכה דנה) was made for the bones of our fathers. Its length is two cubits (אמין תרתין). And it is not to be opened upon them. [19]

The excavator of the tomb, Eleazar Sukenik, suggested that the interdiction to open it stemmed from the desire to prevent the collection of bones into ossuaries and the subsequent reuse of the tomb. Furthermore, he proposed that this was the reason behind the mention of the chamber length: apparently, two cubits were considered to be a small size for a tomb.⁷ This would have deterred future potential users from opening it for reuse. The burial cave contained several ossuaries and, apparently, a single loculus (*kokh*) that was not opened in Antiquity and whose contents remained intact: that of the parents (literally “fathers”) mentioned above. When the tomb was opened by the excavators, it was found to contain two skeletons. For similar examples, see *CIIP* I.I: 379–80, text 359. [20]

A similar appeal against the opening of a burial space can be found in Jerusalem, on a limestone ossuary uncovered in the Talbiyeh neighbourhood (see fig. 3). This time the appeal refers to the ossuary, not a tomb, but it is probable that the reason behind it was identical: preventing the opening and reuse of the ossuary for the gathering of another person’s remains. The Aramaic text inscribed on the ossuary lid states (Sukenik 1928, 115; 1929; Yellin 1929; Savignac 1929; *CIIP* I.I: 396-7, text 375): [21]

Our father Dositheos (דוסתס). And not to be opened (ולא למפתח).⁸ [22]

7 The length of the rock-cut tomb was 156 cm, meaning either that the “cubit” referred to would have been larger than usually measured in that period, namely 78 cm versus the typical 45-48 cm, or that the person who composed the inscription *deliberately* declared the tomb to be smaller than it actually was, so that it would not be opened. The commentary about this issue in *CIIP* I.I: 481 is incorrect.

8 Sukenik mistakenly read the last words as “ולא למנתה”, “and for his widow.” This reading was corrected soon after by Yellin (1929), followed by Savignac (1929). Sukenik, while acknowledging that the correct



Figure 3 Engraved inscription on ossuary lid, Talbiyeh, Jerusalem. After Savignac 1929 (1929, plate IV).

One of the ossuary facets contains a shorter text, this time only mentioning the name “Father Dositheos.” Perhaps as an addition to the prohibitory inscription, the ossuary lid was further reinforced with an iron rivet. It is interesting to note that Dositheos’ ossuary was the only one among the group of nine whose inscription requested that it should not be opened. All the other ossuaries bore only names, sometimes mentioning the family relation of the persons whose bones were collected therein, e.g., “Our mother Shelamzion” or “The sons of El’azar.”⁹ One of them bore the name “Dositheos,” and its lid, too, was reinforced with an iron rivet, yet with no additional injunctions.

[23]

In a Jewish context, this simple form of appeal for the protection of the grave, which implies no fine nor mentions divine justice, is only found in epigraphic records from Palestine, and only in those of a relatively early date.¹⁰ It does appear, however, in non-Jewish inscriptions from Syria-Palaestina.¹¹ In Asia Minor the appeals not to open the grave do not appear in a simple form, but are usually accompanied by a curse.¹²

[24]

Protection Appeals Specifying Penalties

This subcategory is probably the most common among Jewish appeals for the protection of the grave. It is only found in Asia Minor and Italy; to the best of my knowledge no identifiable Jewish inscription specifying a fine or another form of penalty has been found elsewhere. The penalties mentioned in Jewish inscriptions usually consist of a monetary fine, but sometimes a criminal lawsuit is mentioned (e.g., on the sarcophagus of Fabius Zosimus from Thyatira in Asia Minor; *IJO* II: 297–302, text 146: “he falls under the law of tomb violation”). A text may also refer to the law, but make no explicit threat with a penalty (e.g., *JJWE* I: 43–5, text 26: “I ask you to make sure you take care that no one casts down my inscription contrary to the law”). It should be noted that occasionally, monetary fines are mentioned in inscriptions

[25]

reading was “and not to be opened,” maintained that Yellin’s argument referring to a prohibition to open the ossuary and disturb the bones was mistaken, and so was also the attribution of the metal rivet to a desire to keep the ossuary closed.

9 It is possible that all the persons buried in the cave were members of one extended family; see *CIIP* I.I: 396–404 with full references.

10 For additional examples, see Hachlili (2005, 496–98). For non-Jewish examples from Palestine, see *CIIP* IV.II: 992–3, text 3526, from Marissa. This Greek inscription, painted over an underground tomb and dated to the third–first century BCE, states: “Let no one open.”

11 See, for example, an epitaph inscribed in Nabatean from Qasr al-Bint (*CIS* II.I: 265–6, text 226): “And it should not be opened over them, to eternity.”

12 See, for example, the epitaph of Krokos, an eunuch servant of a Cilician princess, in which three Erinyes state: “Do not open. For it is not proper (οὐ θέμις),” but then conclude with an actual curse (Strubbe 1997, 266–67, text 393).

that include an explicit curse (Strubbe 1994, 102–4). The following examples illustrate how some Jews made recourse to legal means in order to protect funerary spaces, without adding a supernatural element.¹³

The epitaph of a man named Nicostratus, inscribed on a marble stele and dated approximately to the third/fourth century CE, mentions what seems to be an exorbitant fine: a million denarii, to be paid to the synagogue in case a different body is placed inside the grave (*IJO* I: 88–91, text Mac12):¹⁴ [26]

Flavius(?) Nicostratus Aurelius Oxycholius made this grave for himself. If someone puts the dead body of another person (in it), he shall pay the synagogue a fine of 1,000,000 denarii.¹⁵ [27]

The editors of *IJO* suggest that the extremely high monetary fine was meant to counteract cases of inflation, when a small fine might have become insignificant (*IJO* I: 91). [28]

A second example is the epitaph of Maria, daughter of Tertia and Leontius, which was erected somewhere in the fourth or fifth century CE by her son-in-law. He ended the inscription with the specification of a monetary fine, to be paid to the synagogue (*IJO* I: 78–81, text Mac7). At an unknown point in time the marble stele was uprooted and reused as building material. It is now embedded in the floor of the church Panagia Gorgoepikoos in Veria (ancient Beroea), Greece. [29]

Tomb of the pious Maria, daughter of Tertia and Leontius. (I), Alexander her son-in-law, inscribed (this inscription), in remembrance of her kind deeds. If anyone opens the tomb, he shall pay to the most holy synagogue one pound of silver. [30]

Similar to the previous text, the editors of *IJO* note that the use of a precious metal as currency “avoided the fine being made meaningless by inflation or reform of the currency” (*IJO* I: 81). [31]

In both the epitaphs of Nicostratus and Maria, the potential fine had to be paid to the religious institution of the Jews, thus entrusting to their community the interest to find and apprehend the tomb violators (Arkwright 1911, 270). Yet other Jewish inscriptions refer to non-Jewish institutions. For instance, the epitaph of Aurelius Samuel (Samohil) and his wife, found in Sicily and dated to 383 CE, states “But if anyone should open it, let them give ten pounds of silver to the treasury (*fisco*)” (*JIWE* I: 187–92, text 145, for which see more below). According to David Noy, the treasury referred to is the imperial one (1998, 192), which was thus designated as the body that should benefit from apprehending any violators of the tomb. Similarly, the epitaph of Publius Catilius Hermias and some of his family members, found in the Jewish catacomb of Vigna Randanini in Rome, imposes a fine of 5,000 denarii to be paid to the treasury (ταμίω) should anyone open the tomb and bury another person in it (*JIWE* II: 304–6, text 360). This epitaph, engraved on a marble plaque around the third century CE, also contained a curse, and was highly reminiscent of epitaphs with curses from Asia Minor. Hence, it is usually regarded as belonging to a Jewish family from Asia Minor who moved to Rome and brought their funerary traditions with them (*JIWE* II: 305). [32]

Other appeals for protection specify two fines: one to be paid to the synagogue and another to the treasury. A famous example is the inscription (not epitaph) put up by Rufina, a wealthy [33]

13 For an overview of non-Jewish funerary fines, see Arkwright (1911).

14 Several issues arise in relation to the text, and some scholars suggest the stone was reused in antiquity, with the first name added.

15 The sum was expressed in Greek as *MR = μ(ύ)ρ(α)

Jewish woman from Smyrna, around the second or third century CE. The text, engraved on a marble plaque, specifies (*IJO* II: 187–92, text 43):

Rufina, a Jewess, head of the synagogue (ἀρχισυνάγωγος), built this tomb for her freed slaves and the slaves raised in her household. No one else has the right to bury anyone [here]. Anyone who dares to do [so] will pay 1,500 denarii to the sacred treasury and 1,000 denarii to the Jewish people (ἔθνεϊ). A copy of this inscription has been placed in the archive. [34]

In this case, the inscription is not an epitaph commemorating a deceased person, but a legal document engraved in marble, denoting both the location of a tomb, its owner, the persons it was meant for, and an appeal for protection specifying a double penalty. [35]

It seems that no protection appeals specifying penalties have ever been found on ossuaries or in other Jewish funerary contexts in Palestine. The Jewish epigraphic evidence for such appeals seems to originate in ancient Greece (primarily Asia Minor, for which see *IJO* II, index 5, “Grabmult”) and also appears in isolated cases in Italy. It is probable that Jews were influenced in this case by the local culture, and applied its customs to their funerary inscriptions. [36]

Protection Appeals Referring to the Divine Law

The third subcategory is closest in essence to an actual funerary imprecation, only that no such imprecation is explicitly mentioned. Instead, those who manipulate the grave and the remains found therein are threatened with divine judgement, or, alternatively, an appeal is made to supernatural entities. An example can be found in a Jewish inscription written in Greek, carved above an arcosolium in Beit Shearim, catacomb 12, and dated approximately to the third century CE ([Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974, 139–40, text 162](#)): [37]

Anyone who changes this lady’s place, He who promised to resurrect the dead will Himself judge. [38]

Interestingly, the lady remains anonymous, and it is the prohibition to move her remains that takes central place in this inscription. [39]

A later example in the category of appeals for the protection of the grave derives from Argos in Peloponnese Greece. It is a marble plaque inscribed with the epitaph of a man named Aurelius Joses. The Greek text, consisting of 11 lines, has been dated to the third or early fourth century CE (*IJO* I: 190–193, text Ach51). [40]

I, Aurelius Joses, adjure (ἐνεύχομαι) (by) the divine and great powers of God, and the powers of the law, and the honour of the patriarchs, and the honour of the ethnarchs, and the honour of the wise, and the honour of the reverence which is paid each day to God, nobody (is) to open my memorial (μνημα), which I have made with many efforts. [41]

The name of the commemorated person indicates a Jew with Roman citizenship (*IJO* I: 191). If we are to take the epitaph’s wording literally, Aurelius Joses had purchased his tomb (referred to as “memorial”) himself, and perhaps even composed the text. The epitaph consists of a long adjuration resorting to several human and divine entities. Some of these are of an unclear nature, for example, it has been debated whether the noun “law” refers to the Jewish or the [42]

Roman law, or whether “patriarchs” concerns the three biblical personages or the holders of a political office from Palestine (*Nesi'im*) (see also Aurelius Samuel’s epitaph, below). Be that as it may, for the purpose of the present article it is important to note that the epitaph does not contain an actual curse, merely an appeal supported by supernatural means (an adjuration, including by the “powers of God”). It seems that this adjuration was deemed sufficient for ensuring that the tomb will remain unopened.

In some cases one finds a combination of a monetary fine with a divine element, such as the following adjuration found in a Jewish epitaph from the fourth century CE, discovered in Sicily (see also above, par. 32). The first line of the text is inscribed in Hebrew and all the subsequent ones in Latin (*JIVE* I, 187–192, text 145): [43]

Hebrew: Peace upon Israel. Amen, amen, peace. Shemuel. [44]

Latin: I, Aurelius Samohil (= Samuel), bought the memorial for myself and my wife Lassia Irene, who completed her allotted span on 21 October, a Friday, in the eighth month,¹⁶ when Merobaudes for the second time and Saturninus were consuls. She lived for 23 years with peace. I adjure you (*adiuro vos*) by the victories (of those) who rule, and I adjure you by the honours of the patriarchs, and I adjure you by the law which the Lord gave the Jews (*quem Dominus dedit Iudeis*): let no one open the memorial and put the someone else’s body on top of our bones. But if anyone should open it, let them give ten pounds of silver to the treasury. [45]

Given its wealth of interesting details, the epitaph of Aurelius Samuel and his wife has been widely discussed. For the present survey, it is important to note that Samuel seems to have been a fully Romanized Jew, who treasured his Judaism. The text beautifully combines elements from both cultural traditions yet maintains a separating line. For secular matters it uses the Roman standards, yet where more religious or spiritual matters are concerned, such as a wish for the departed to lie in peace, or an adjuration, the text refers to the Jewish sphere. [46]

A much shorter inscription that contains an adjuration is found on an ossuary from Jerusalem (provenance uncertain), dated to the first century BCE/first century CE (see fig. 4). The short Greek text is not easy to interpret, and there was even some uncertainty regarding the gender of the deceased (Tertia or Tertian) (the translation below follows *CHIP* I.I: 526–7, text 507). The ossuary also contains a short inscription in Aramaic/Hebrew, possibly referring to the person who purchased it. This is placed on a different facet of the ossuary. [47]

I adjure (ὀρκίζω) that no one take away/lift out Tertia (from the ossuary).¹⁷ [48]

Of Jehot? (Jehonathan?) or: Eliyahu T (שליהות / אליהו ת) [49]

The interesting aspect of this ossuary is in the use of the Greek verb “I adjure,” whose reading is certain. Whether it referred to the moving of the remains of a woman named Tertia, or whether Tertia/Tertian were actually the owners/purchasers of the ossuary, it is certain that the person who inscribed the text had a supernatural allusion in mind when employing this [50]

16 The Latin text reads: “*XII Kal(endas) Novebres, diae Veneris, luna octaba*”. While the first part of the date refers to the Roman calendar, the “eight month” refers to the Jewish one, namely the month Heshvan. For a discussion of the date, see *JIVE* I, 190.

17 The first editor, L.Y. Rahmani, provided a slightly different reading: “I adjure: let no one take away (of) Tertian” (*Rahmani* 1994, 139–40, number 259), but mentioned that it was possible that Τερτίαν referred to a female name.

OPKIZW
 MTAENAA
 PATEPTIAN



Figure 4 Engraved adjuration on an ossuary. Jerusalem (?). After Rahmani (1994, 139).

verb. In a way, the text can be said to resemble the epitaph of Aurelius Joses mentioned above, only in a much more concise form.

The ossuary inscription is scribbled with large but rather rough letters that might have been difficult to decipher even in Antiquity. Did the writer expect the adjuration to be read by those who potentially planned to open the ossuary? Or was this adjuration (also) directed to another audience? This question will be discussed further below. [51]

Lastly, to the subcategory of protection appeals referring to the divine law one could add the Jewish ossuary inscriptions referring to a sacrifice (קורבן) (Zissu and Ganor 2010, with previous literature; Manekin-Bamberger 2019, 344–46). For example, one such ossuary found south of Jerusalem states that “Everything which a man will benefit [from] in this ossuary is a *qorban* to God from the one within it” (כל די אנש מתהנה בחלתה דה קרבן אלה מן דבגוה) (Milik 1956–1957). This is a complex concept, not fully elucidated. It could be that the person who opened or manipulated the ossuary contents was regarded as a “sacrifice,” implying they were actually cursed (cf. the “dedications” to gods in the Graeco-Roman curse tablets), or else that the ossuary itself was regarded as a sacrifice, and hence it was not to be “benefitted from” (meaning used) by any person. [52]

Curses in Jewish Funerary Texts

A small number of what may be termed “actual funerary curses” survives from the Jewish world. This third type of texts, type C, are the ones that form the focus of this article. They are explicit curse formulae found in a Jewish funerary context: on ossuaries, on the walls of burial caves, or on architectural elements of graves. My attempt to compile a corpus of such inscriptions resulted in fewer than thirty texts. These derive primarily from two locations: ancient Palestine and Asia Minor. After briefly surveying the texts and providing some examples, I would like to look at their main features and at the motivations that led their authors to inscribe these curses. [53]

Jewish funerary curses derive both from primary burial contexts as well as secondary burials, meaning ossuaries. This distinction is important when considering the state of mind of the people who composed the curses. Obviously, there is an essential difference between someone who inscribes a curse in close temporal proximity to the death of their loved ones, and someone who does so many months or years afterwards. The second feature to consider regards the location of the inscriptions and consequently, their readability. An inscription faintly scrawled [54]

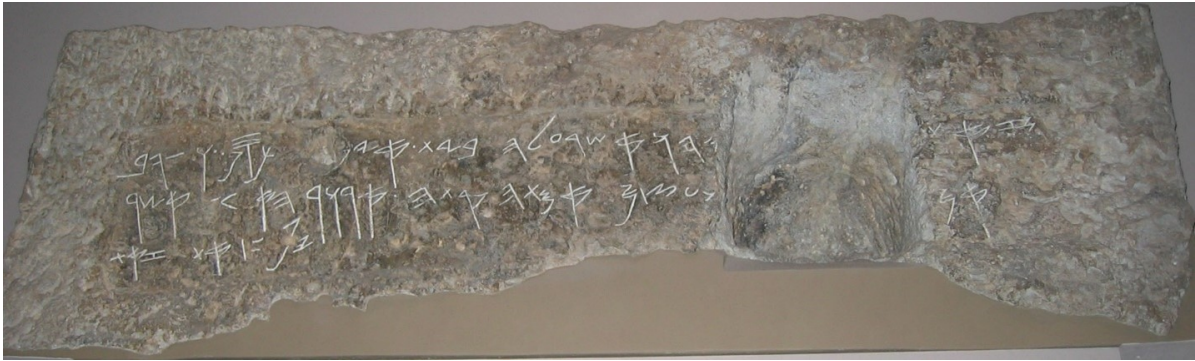


Figure 5 The inscription of the “Royal steward” from Siloam. British Museum number 125205. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

on a limestone ossuary, placed inside a dark burial cave, is different than a large one engraved on a marble stele and placed in an open-air cemetery (for a summary of locations of some Jewish curses, see [Hachlili 2005, 496](#)). The third feature one must take into account when analysing these funerary curses is their mode of execution. The curses are either well-inscribed, usually by a professional, and could be easily read by a literate person, or, in the case of many inscriptions from Palestine, are roughly and unprofessionally executed. All these elements will be discussed further below, but for now it suffices to be aware of them when surveying the examples.

Curses on Primary Burial Spaces

One of the oldest Jewish funerary curses that survives was inscribed above a small rock-cut tomb in Silwan, Jerusalem, and is dated to the eighth or seventh century BCE.¹⁸ Its words are engraved beautifully in the ancient Hebrew script, clearly by a professional hand (see [fig. 5](#)) ([Avigad 1953, 143](#); for the architectural context see [Ussishkin 1969](#)):

This is [the sepulchre of] [...]yahu who is over the house. There is no silver and gold here, but [his bones] and the bones of his slave-wife with him. Cursed be the man who will open this (אָרֹר הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יִפְתַּח אֶת זֹאת).

The text, which has several parallels in non-Jewish inscriptions from the area ([Avigad 1953, 147–48](#)), provides a clear insight into one of the motivations for opening tombs: the search for precious grave-goods. The declaration “there is no silver and gold here” should have served as a guarantee against tomb robbers. Additionally, the Siloam inscription serves as an epitaph for the two persons buried in the rock-cut chamber: a royal functionary “who is over the house,” whose name did not survive (Charles Clermont-Ganneau, who discovered the inscription, suggested it had been deliberately effaced), and his official concubine (אִמָּה), who was never named. Interestingly, the composer of the text in the eighth or seventh century BCE assumed that the potential tomb robbers were literate and capable of reading the statement concerning the lack of precious objects. While the curse ending the inscription may have been intended for a different, supernatural audience (see below), it is clear that the phrase concerning the absence of gold and silver had a human reader in mind.

18 The inscription was discovered in situ, above the lintel of the entrance to the tomb. Another inscription was engraved a few centimeters away, on the wall in front of a second tomb (see [Ussishkin 1969](#) for the text). Charles Clermont-Ganneau, who discovered the inscriptions, had them cut out from the rock and sent to the British Museum, where they are housed to this day.

Other Jewish curses in the context of primary burials derive from a much later period. Some were found in the catacombs of Beit Shearim and date approximately to the third century CE. Some of these are in Aramaic, others display Aramaic and Greek side by side, and yet others are inscribed entirely in Greek. [58]

Particularly interesting are two Aramaic inscriptions threatening the potential openers of the tombs with an “evil end.” One of these is solely in Aramaic, whereas the second was accompanied by a Greek inscription. A third Aramaic inscription probably belonged to this group, but only its first words survive, without the concluding threat. All three were painted in red: two on the catacomb walls and the third, fragmentary one, on a stone slab that was probably used to close a tomb. In my view, it is not impossible that they were all written by the same hand. They are dated to the third century CE (Avigad 1976, 234–35, text 2): [59]

He who is buried here is Shim'on the son of Jochanan. And on oath (ובשבועה) whoever shall open upon him shall die of an evil end (יהי מאית בסוף ביש). [60]

According to Avigad, the “oath” referred to a sworn curse (similar in nature to that found in Numbers 5:21). If this interpretation is correct, it might shed some light on the other instances when the notion of “oath” or “adjuration” is employed in this corpus, for example the ossuary inscription stating “I adjure (ὀρκίζω) that no one take away Tertius,” or “warn with an oath (חשישתה שבועה)” (Hachlili 2005, 506, text 20). Another remarkable concept is the “evil end” encountered here and in the following inscription (Kister 2003, 318–20). It could be interpreted in various ways, from the prosaic “untimely death” to a specific manner of death (by execution or other forms of violence), or perhaps even refer to one’s destiny in the afterlife. Interestingly, this Aramaic expression can be compared with the Latin “*malus exitus*,” found on curse tablets from Mainz (Gordon 2013, 273, with further instances). [61]

The second example, combining Greek and Aramaic, is an anonymous inscription that reads (Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974, 123–24, text 134; Avigad 1976, 23): [62]

Greek: Nobody shall open, in accordance with the divine and secular law (κατὰ τήν ὀσίαν κατὰ πρόσταγ[μ]α). [63]

Aramaic: Anyone who shall open this burial upon upon (*sic*) whomever is inside it shall die of an evil end (ימות בסוף ביש). [64]

Both inscriptions were painted on the wall of the same *arcosolium*, and referred to the same grave, but they were not adjacent. Given their size and poor lettering form, it is unclear how easily readable they could have been, especially given the lighting conditions in the catacomb. There is no way of knowing which inscription came first, whether they were inscribed on the same occasion or even by the same hand. There must have been a reason that the person(s) who inscribed them decided to write in two languages, and express something different with each language. However, given the paucity of data, I refrain from speculating about the reasons for doing so. [65]

It is notable that in the Greek text two legal systems are mentioned together, with the divine one preceding the human. The Greek might sound relatively mild, since it does not refer to the judgement that the grave opener will incur, only to the fact that it is against the law(s) to open the grave. However, the Aramaic inscription contained an actual curse, promising an “evil end” to whomever dared to open it, and one may infer from it what was comprised in the divine law. [66]

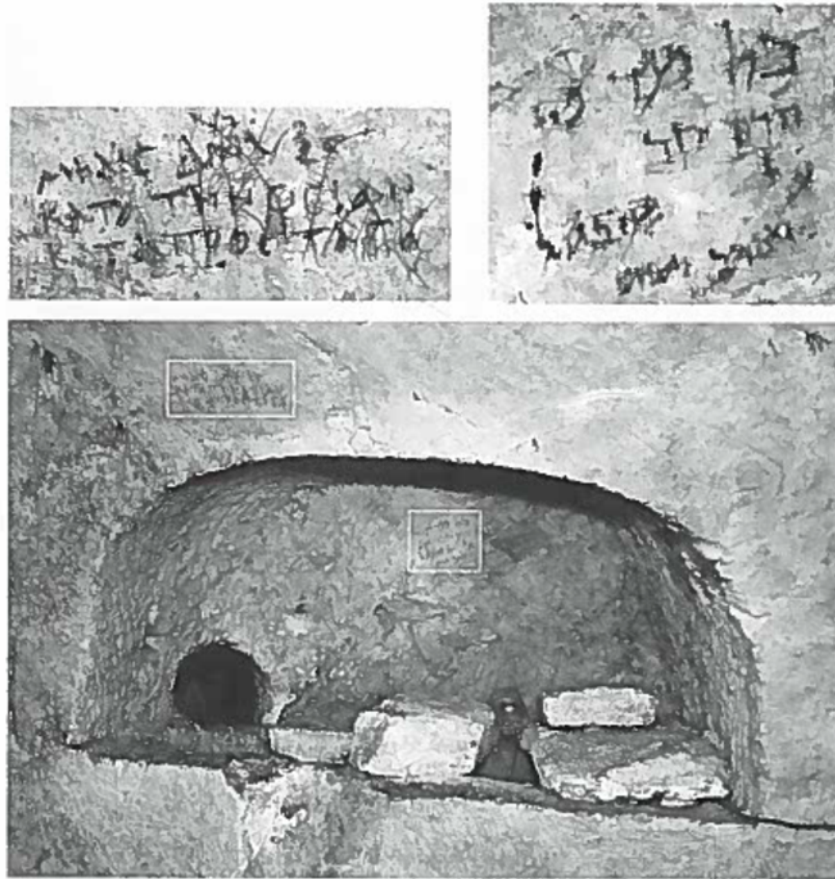


Figure 6 The Greek and Aramaic inscriptions for protecting the tomb of an anonymous person. Beit Shearim, catacomb 12. After Avigad (1976, plate III).

As opposed to the previous Aramaic inscription of Shim'on son of Jochanan, here the occupant of the tomb remained anonymous. There is no sign of a commemorative inscription, though it cannot be wholly ruled out that one existed which did not survive. It seems that the anonymity of the tomb occupant was deliberate, hence the Aramaic phrasing “whomever is inside it (the tomb).” It is not unusual for women to remain unnamed in funerary inscriptions, as can be seen also in some of the examples above. It is thus possible that here, too, the deceased was a woman. Yet, instead of commemorating this person, even by mentioning her/his relation to the one who buried them (e.g., “our mother,” “this lady”), those left behind focused solely on the preservation of the tomb (see fig. 6). [67]

A Greek inscription from catacomb 11 in Beit Shearim, dated to the third century CE, was painted in red on the front of an *arcosolium* (Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974, 112–14, text 129): [68]

I, Hesychios, lie here with my wife. May anyone who dares to open (the grave) above us not have a portion in the eternal life (μη̄ ἔχη μέρος εἰς τὸν [βίον] ἄόνητο[ν]). [69]

As mentioned by the editors (Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974, 114), the inscription “gives expression to the belief in eternal life.” In this sense, it may explain the importance of not opening the grave, in case the occupants or their family also believed in a bodily resurrection. [70]

Other curses connected to primary burials are found in Asia Minor. As mentioned above, that region sported a tradition of non-Jewish funerary inscriptions that included imprecations, and [71]

some Jews probably adopted the habit of their compatriots. Nevertheless, some of the curses they employed displayed idiosyncrasies, pointing to the Jewish identity of their composers. It is of course possible that some Jews employed non-Jewish curse formulae, and thus their epitaphs would be undistinguishable from the polytheistic or Christian ones.

In three important works Johan Strubbe discussed funerary curses in a general context and in a Jewish one, all focusing on Asia Minor (Strubbe 1991, 1994, 1997). He noted that this region has yielded more than 360 epitaphs with some form of imprecation (Strubbe 1994, 70; and the full catalogue in Strubbe 1997). In his article from 1994, Strubbe presented a corpus of Jewish epitaphs with explicit curses as well as protection appeals (e.g., “he will have to reckon with the judgement (of God)”), counting a total of thirteen texts from Asia Minor, and one from Rome that was possibly of a family who migrated from there (see above). This is not a large number to begin with, and Strubbe further explained that some of the texts in the corpus “may be Jewish or Christian,” while some “are probably pagan” (Strubbe 1994, 100). This means that the number of Jewish epitaphs with curses from Asia Minor was tiny. Among them, several contain both a curse and a penalty.

Among the epitaphs in Strubbe’s corpus a particularly interesting one belongs to a person whose name was lost. In Strubbe’s opinion it might have been either Jewish or Christian, since both religious groups were acquainted with the Book of Deuteronomy and might have chosen to mention its curses. The inscription was engraved in Greek on a marble monument (*bomos*) dated to the second or third century CE. It derives from the region of Akmonia, and was discovered in secondary use in Imrez (Strubbe 1994, 117–18; *IJO* II: 368–70, text 174):

[...] it will (not) be permitted to another person to open the lair (κάθετον), except only when it happens for his children Domne and Alexandria. But if they will marry,¹⁹ it will not be permitted to open (the grave). Who, however, will dare to put in it another (corpse), will pay to the most sacred treasury 1,000 Attic drachmae, and nonetheless he will be liable for the accusation of grave robbery. Such a man will be accursed (ἐπικατάρατος) and may as many curses as are written in Deuteronomy (ὅσαι ἄρα ἐν τῷ Δευτερονομίῳ εἰσὶν γεγραμμένα) befall him and his children and his descendants and his whole family (αὐτῷ τε καὶ τέκνοις καὶ ἐγγόνοις καὶ παντὶ τῷ γένει αὐτοῦ γένοιτο).

The curses of the Deuteronomy are probably the ones in chapters 27–29. They were known to Jews and Christians, and possibly to parts of the polytheist population in Late Antiquity. References to the descendants of the tomb violator are also not uncommon in funerary epigraphy (for a list of attestations and analysis, see Strubbe 1994, 73–83). A partial parallel to this notion may be found in much older texts, for instance: “Exactly in the way that he did injustice to me and to my children, in that way Oserapis and the gods should bring it about that he not be buried by his children and that he himself cannot bury his parents” (Memphis, imprecatory text on papyrus, fourth century BCE, see Versnel 1991, 68–69). It is important to note the elements of memory and descendancy implicit in these curses: one’s children are the ones who would, in principle, perpetuate one’s name and legacy, as well as ensure a proper burial for the parents. The curse above, and others of its type, seek to disrupt this normal state of affairs by harming the children and their descendants. In this context, it is interesting to

19 Presumably, this implies that their family grave will be elsewhere, and provided for by their husbands or extended families.

note that the owner of this epitaph listed the names of his two daughters on it as potential future users of the tomb.

Curses on Ossuaries

Contradictory to the statement in *CIIP* I.I: 407, “Ossuary warnings did not, however, threaten the violator with a curse, unlike warnings in other epigraphic contexts,” some ossuaries included an imprecatory element. An evident example is the ossuary of Alexa son of Shalom (Baruch, Levi, and Reich 2011): [76]

Alexa son of Shalom daughter of Alexa. Cursed be he who will take me from my place (ארור שיטלני ממקומי) (or: who will take him from his place).²⁰ [77]

The text contains several remarkable features. If it was indeed written in the first person, as the *editio princeps* suggests, this would be a rare occurrence, raising interesting questions about the identity of the inscription composer. Did Alexa purchase this ossuary during his lifetime, and had the text incised into its wall (or maybe even did so with his own hand)? Did he request his family to write such a text? Or was the choice of words entirely unrelated to Alexa, and derived from the minds of his commemorators? Another interesting feature is the reference to Alexa through his matronym. Baruch, Levi and Reich suggest that Alexa’s commemorators chose to refer to his maternal grandfather rather than to his father, as was customary throughout Antiquity, because “the grandfather of the deceased, Alexa, was a personality of some standing in the Jewish society of Jerusalem.” Other possibilities exist, such as Alexa being fatherless, and consequently employing his maternal filiation throughout his life. One could imagine scenarios in which both cases could have impacted the choice of Alexa’s commemorators to include a curse on his ossuary. [78]

Another ossuary with an explicit curse is that of Maryam, wife of Mathia, which was discovered during excavations in the French Hill neighbourhood in Jerusalem (see fig. 7). It sports a bilingual inscription, of which the Hebrew part, written with black paint or charcoal, contains the name of the deceased, whereas the Greek part, engraved in the stone, reiterates the name and adds a curse [Rahmani (1994), 197, text 559; *CIIP* I.I: 469–71, text 451]: [79]

Hebrew: Maryam wife of Mathia [80]

Greek: Maryame wife of Mathia. Whoever moves these (bones), may blindness (?) strike him (πατάξει αὐτὸ(ν) οὐρου) [81]

The word οὐρου is, according to Rahmani, the Hebrew word “*ywaron*” (עורון), meaning “blindness,” rendered in Greek transliteration. This seems rather strange, though it is not impossible. The notion of cursing the eyesight is found in a few funerary curses, both Jewish and non-Jewish (Strubbe 1994, 91–92). Expressions of striking with blindness appear in the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 28:28, Zechariah 12:4), and when these passages were translated into Greek in the Septuagint, the verb employed was πατάσσειν, just as in the above inscription. However, the ossuary inscriber did not include the Greek word for blindness, but apparently chose to transliterate it from Hebrew. If this is indeed the case, the reasons for it are unclear. What can be said with relative certainty is that the ossuary of Maryam included a curse: [82]

²⁰ According to the editors of *CIIP* I.II: 471–2, text 1088, the inscription employs the third person singular, namely: “Cursed is the one who takes him from his (resting-)place.” The lengths of the relevant Hebrew letters, *waw* and *yod*, could be interpreted in both ways.

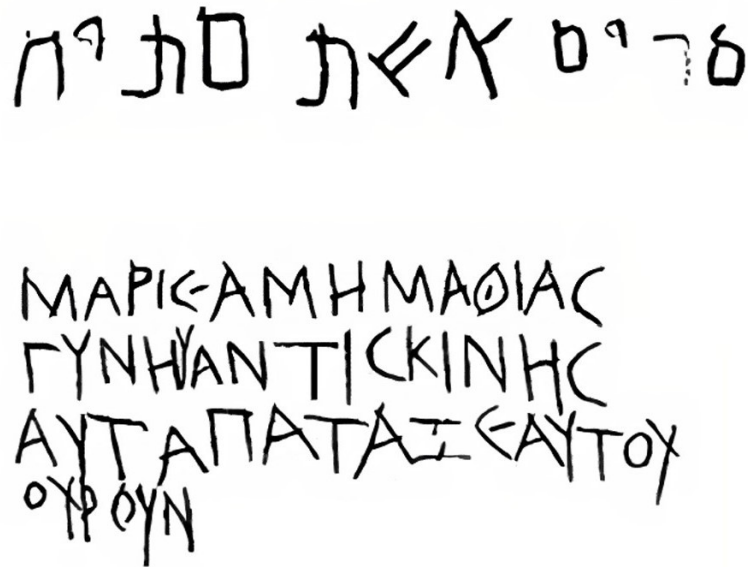


Figure 7 Bilingual inscription on ossuary. French Hill, Jerusalem. After Rahmani (1994, 197).

something will strike the person who opens it, though what that “something” was is not fully clear. If Rahmani’s suggestion, adopted also by the *CIIP* editors, is correct, then one ought to ask, once again: who was the intended audience of the inscription? Were the potential tomb robbers expected to read Greek and understand the transliterated Hebrew word for “blindness”?

Questionable Curses

The overview of imprecations in Jewish funerary contexts presented above raises several questions. Surprisingly, these were ignored in most discussions of the topic in the past which focused primarily (or solely) on the epigraphic evidence, without considering it in a wider physical, psychological, and cultural context. It is high time to change this picture, and bring the neglected questions to the fore. [83]

I wish to begin with the most palpable element, namely the physical aspect of the imprecatory inscriptions. As mentioned before, one needs to consider the visibility of these inscriptions (in a burial cave, catacomb, or in the open air), as well as their readability (engraved in stone or faintly scratched, with clear, professional lettering or jumbled handwriting). A survey of the Jewish curses indicates that many of them derive from open-air cemeteries (Asia Minor) and were inscribed by a professional hand, with good lettering. They would have been visible to passers-by (many ancient cemeteries were aligned along roads outside towns), as well as to the potential violators of the grave and to the people who had a financial interest in pursuing such violators. When looking at the inscriptions from Palestine the situation is totally different. The most ancient inscription, from the eighth or seventh century BCE, was indeed a monumental one, easily visible (outside a rock-cut tomb) and displaying professional engraving with clear lettering. However, all later ones derive from interior burial spaces. A visitor to these tombs would need to actively seek out the inscriptions by placing his/her oil lamp or torch in their proximity. One needs to ask how likely is it that potential grave robbers would be interested, [84]

willing, and capable to read the curses that were targeting them. In this context, it is perhaps relevant to quote from the article by Baruch, Levi and Reich, who refer to the visibility inside the burial cave (2011, 98): “Due to the unsatisfactory lighting conditions, not all the ossuaries were examined.” It is probable that the persons entering such a cave in Antiquity had similarly poor lighting conditions, and they would not have invested much time in deciphering the text on an ossuary before opening it, or the inscription above a grave before removing the bones of the deceased lying there, if this was their original intent.

As far as readability is concerned, the situation is similar. A literate person who knew Greek could easily read the funerary curses from Asia Minor. On the other hand, such a person would usually have to struggle with the Greek curses from Palestine, given their poor execution technique. Should the inscription be written in Aramaic, such as the texts from Beit Shearim threatening with an “evil end,” the reader would also need to be familiar with this language in order to understand the curse. [85]

A second, and closely connected aspect to consider, is the literacy of the potential tomb violators. Johan Strubbe’s article is an exception in considering the reading of the curses by those who were supposed to be deterred by them (Strubbe 1994, 100). If those who opened a tomb in order to reuse it were indeed poor persons, from the lower levels of society, would they have been sufficiently literate in order to read these texts, even when they were easily legible? Conversely, could it be that some of the potential violators belonged to other socio-economic classes (which would explain the possibility of threatening them with fines)? There is evidence that also higher classes opened tombs or plundered their building materials, for instance in order to reuse the latter as spolia (Murer 2018), to expand existing graves, or reuse the burial space (e.g., Borg 2013, 155, with references to Isola Sacra tomb 34; Brent 2017). This aspect should benefit from a profounder exploration than has hitherto been attempted. [86]

A third aspect, and one more often discussed, concerns the comprehension of the texts. Some are easy to understand, assuming one is able to (a) see and (b) read them. For instance, the ossuary of Alexa son of Shalom makes a straightforward statement about the fate of the person who will move him from his place: he will be cursed. Yet other texts are more complex, and even modern scholars struggle to comprehend them. What does it mean to be stricken with *ywarwn*? What did “the curses that are written in Deuteronomy” mean to a polytheist grave robber? How many potential tomb violators understood the references to the “law of the Jews” and cared? [87]

When attempting to consider all the above aspects, it seems that the audience of many of the Jewish imprecatory inscriptions (or those of a similar nature) could not have exclusively been the tomb robbers, violators, or mis-appropriators. I suggest that these texts were not only directed to human readers, but had an additional audience in mind: the supernatural entities (be these God or lesser entities acting in his power) who could ensure that the tomb disturbance did not go unpunished. If this suggestion is correct, it would explain why some epitaphs, such as “adiuro vos (...) per legem quam Dominus dedit Judaeis,” seem to assume an acquaintance of their non-Jewish readers with Jewish curses and religious laws (Van der Horst 1991, 57). These phrases may actually have been directed to a supernatural audience, who presumably knew which curses and which laws are meant. My assumption partially contradicts that of Noy, who suggested that “the threats (...) have to use deterrents whose power can be felt outside Jewish circles” (Noy 1998, 115; see also Strubbe 1994, 102). [88]

Similarly, supernatural entities may have been the audience of Jewish type A curses, “prayers for revenge.” As noted earlier, I am familiar with only two Jewish (or Samaritan) examples [89]

from Antiquity, the Rheneia inscriptions. However, more texts that can be considered “prayers for revenge” appear on Jewish epitaphs from the medieval period.

Moving now to the psychological aspects of the funerary imprecations and related texts, one needs to ask: (a) what purpose did these funerary inscriptions serve, and (b) whether they were consistent with the cultural practices of the times and places from which they derive. Most often, a funerary inscription is meant to commemorate a person, and sometimes also to immortalize the one responsible for erecting the memorial or, especially in the case of Jewish ossuaries, also to denote ownership. However, some of these texts do not even include a name, merely an appeal or a curse meant to prevent the opening of the tomb. The commemorative element is absent, or mixed with a imprecatory and/or legalistic text, making one wonder what emotions were felt by the readers of these inscriptions.²¹

Another psychologically-related aspect concerns the execution of the inscription. Inscriptions engraved in stone by professionals were not created immediately after the person’s death, and also not by the family or friends of the deceased. However, they would be composed by, or in consultation with, them. Inscriptions carved or painted on catacomb walls were probably executed close to the burial (e.g., in one burial cave from Jerusalem the inscription was painted on the wet plaster that closed the tomb). They were possibly made by the hands of the persons who conducted the funeral. Conversely, ossuary inscriptions were made much later, when a year or more had passed and the body had been skeletonized. This does not necessarily mean that the emotions felt by the people who carried out the collection of bones were not strong. They were handling, in the most literal sense of the word, the decomposed remains of their loved ones. However, there was presumably a difference in the state of mind of the two groups. The question that applies to both is: why would they choose to place a curse (even if carefully written) over the resting place of their loved one? The obvious answer is that they wanted to protect it, yet this desire was probably common to most people in Antiquity. And yet, the vast majority, Jews and non-Jews, never included curses or protection appeals in the funerary inscriptions they produced. One needs to keep in mind, therefore, that those who did probably had a reason for doing so which differentiated them from other commemorators in the same place and period.

A caveat is necessary here: some funerary inscriptions contain texts that may seem alien to modern eyes. For instance, an epitaph from Myrikion (Galatia), dated to the second or third century CE, recounts that the deceased, a woman named Statilia, gave in deposit to an unknown person a garment and two silver armbands. Should this deposit not be returned, may “the dead (Statilia) and her living children” be avenged by the gods (Chaniotis 2004, 15–16; Versnel 2010, 294). One may wonder why such a conditional imprecation, concerning a seemingly mundane financial matter, was deemed worthy of appearing on an epitaph, whose function supposedly was to commemorate a mother. This choice of text for posterity appears to contradict modern sensibilities. Yet, apparently, some people in Antiquity regarded a garment and two armbands as sufficiently important to be included in their mother’s epitaph. This anecdote should serve as a caution when applying our modern concepts to ancient history (or more generally, to other chronological and geographical contexts than our own).

It could thus be that the question to consider should be reversed: not why some people decided to include curses on funerary inscriptions, but rather why so few curses are found in a Jewish and non-Jewish funerary context. The French historian Éric Rebillard provides

21 For a discussion of the psychological aspects of cursing, though not in a funerary context, see Gordon (2013).

an interesting statistic regarding curses and warnings against tomb violation in his book *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity* (Rebillard 2009, 70–71). According to him, approximately 3,500 epitaphs include such a formula, either in Greek or in Latin. While this may seem an impressive number, Rebillard also notes that the total number of funerary inscriptions from that period is around half a million. Thus, 3,500 would represent less than 1% of the funerary epigraphic corpus. This figure appears to contradict statements suggesting that “imprecations written on a gravestone (...) were very common in antiquity” (Strubbe 1991, 33). The same is true of statements referring to the ancient Near East, such as “Warning and curses against tomb robbers or against reuse of the tomb appear frequently in inscribed epitaphs throughout the ancient Near East in various languages” (Hachlili 2005, 494). There, too, the actual percentage of inscriptions that contain imprecations is small. While such inscriptions were not unheard of, they also cannot be said to be frequent. Their appearance also varies according to geographical criteria: some regions include more imprecatory epitaphs than others. Additionally, some cultures exhibit a lesser preference to inscribe curses in funerary contexts: there are only a few Jewish and Christian curses among the preserved epitaphs belonging to these religions.

Either tomb robbing or misappropriation were not regarded as a major threat by Jews (and non-Jews), or there were other methods to deal with them that did not leave an epigraphic mark. An often quoted passage from *Satyricon* has Trimalchio worry about his tomb and funerary monument, and assert: “I shall certainly take care to provide in my will against any injury being done to me when I am dead. I am appointing one of the freedmen to be caretaker of the tomb and prevent the common people from running up and defecating on it” (Petronius, *Satyricon* 71).²² Yet another possibility is that more people made recourse to funerary curses, but they did not inscribe them. It is not impossible that part of the burial ceremony, in which the family and friends parted from the deceased wishing him/her to rest in peace, occasionally included a conditional curse against whoever might disturb this peace. This possibility also applies to “prayers for revenge,” which are also barely attested in a Jewish context, and may have been uttered next to the grave rather than inscribed in stone. Such imprecatory rituals are not attested in the periods discussed here, yet nor are the prayers or other oral rituals that undoubtedly accompanied the funeral and, with some probability, also the collection of bones into ossuaries. Additionally, literary evidence for the use of cemeteries as places suitable for delivering oral curses does exist (Babylonian Talmud Mo’ed Qatan 17a), though not in the context of protecting graves.²³ A possible hint supporting this suggestion may be found in the Jewish inscriptions mentioning an oath (שבועה) or an adjuration (ὀρκίζω, *adiuro*), some of which were quoted above. These actions are typical *oral* ones, taking the form of speech acts, and were occasionally recorded in writing. It could be that more speech acts, designed to fight potential robbers and manipulators of tombs, took place during the burial ceremony or the ossilegium. This, however, remains mere speculation and cannot be proved.

[94]

22 “*Ceterum erit mihi curae, ut testamento caveam, ne mortuus iniuriam accipiam. Praeponam enim unum ex libertis sepulcro meo custodiae causa, ne in monumentum meum populus cacatum currat.*” Petronius, translated by Michael Heseltine. 1913. Loeb Classical Library 15. London: William Heinemann. This translation has “defiling it” instead of “defecating on it.”

23 For some connections between Jewish magic and funerary spaces, see Saar (2015); for Jewish practices conducted in cemeteries, see Bohak (2017).

Conclusions

This article attempted to explore Jewish funerary curses from a fresh perspective. I have shown that one needs to distinguish between different forms of curses that tend to be amassed together, some of which are mere appeals for the protection of the grave and its monument. The article also put forward a series of questions that have significant implications for understanding the role of curses and appeals for protection within Jewish funerary culture. These questions are rarely considered in scholarship, and the epigraphic evidence is often examined in a decontextualized manner. One needs to remember that funerary inscriptions and the imprecations or appeals they contained were part of a larger whole, comprising physical, psychological, and cultural elements. Lastly, I have tried to place the Jewish funerary curses in a broader context and to ask why their number was so limited, both in the diaspora and in Palestine. Several answers might exist, one of which is that conditional curses were uttered near the tomb, either during the burial or the collection of bones. If this is the case, one may return to the original question and ask why have the commemorators of people like Alexa son of Shalom, Shim'on son of Jochanan, and Maryam the wife of Matiah chosen to inscribe those curses after all. This question, however, is bound to remain unanswered.

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Abbreviations

- CIIP I.I: Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palestinae. Volume 1/Part 1: Jerusalem: 1-704.* Edited by Hannah M. Cotton, Leah Di Segni, Werner Eck, Benjamin Isaac, Alla Kushnir-Stein, Haggai Misgav, Jonathan Price, Israel Roll, and Ada Yardeni. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter 2011.
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