

BOOK REVIEW

Wise, Michael Owen, *Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea: A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents* (Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). xviii + 557 pp. Hbk. \$85.00 USD.

Readers interested in the languages of ancient Palestine will recognize in the title of this analytical and informative monograph an echo of Catherine Hezser's similarly titled and well established *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (TSAJ, 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001). The differences between the volumes, and Michael Wise's contribution to the discussion, lies in the contrast he demonstrates between her investigative orientation toward the Talmudic period and his own: if language and literacy in the years between Pompey and Hadrian (and thus inclusive of the New Testament period) is to be correctly understood, one must lean on materials assembled from the time period in question, rather than writings of later generations. Hezser examined Hebrew literacy (which she wisely connected within broader issues of multilingualism) but not Hebrew as vernacular. According to Wise, Hezser did not consider the life habits of 'the ordinary person' (p. 28). So Wise argues that Hezser incorrectly drew from an 'obsolete paradigm of Qumran scholarship' (p. 34), that is, the conclusion that Palestinian Jews living between the first century BCE and the medieval period were 'less involved' with reading/writing than their Greco-Roman counterparts.

In this volume, Wise counters that greater allowance must be made for diachronology, consideration of evidence that writing was indeed being taught within Jewish circles and access to a broader inclusion of representative literary sources drawn specifically from the time period in question. The book's subtitle points to his preferable source for studying literacy among Palestinian Jews of the late Second Temple period and immediately following: 'A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents'. Wise isolates from the hundreds of Jewish writings of that

period 145 documents associated with the Bar Kokhba caves, including 118 contracts and 27 letters that were composed for the most part in Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic, Greek and Nabataean, and which represented a wide geographic swath of Judaea. These documents, he says, constitute the ground-level data needed to gauge the language capacities of average people, in contrast to those whose writings led to the ‘high-level models’ (p. 40) encountered in Hezser.

Among the attractive characteristics of Wise’s work is his ability to visualize daily experiences so as to keep his model grounded in reality. He says that if one could speak Aramaic and write individual Hebrew letters of the alphabet, one could likewise operate at least on a rudimentary level in Hebrew. When writing legal documents, family members tended to take part in the process. The presence of high quality household objects at the Cave of Letters evidences considerable family wealth, even there ‘at the vanishing point of the Roman world’ (p. 191). He also considers the implications of a document in which different hands authored constituent parts, or when an ‘idiosyncratic hand’ can be seen, or when writing was done ‘carelessly’, or when there was ‘peculiar...cursive handwriting’, or when something was ‘written by an unprofessional’ (pp. 252-53). Readers will appreciate Appendix A with its catalogue of significant documents, and the list of signatories and writers of those documents in Appendix B, both of which indicate the language used in each sample and thereby constitute his depiction of the use of languages in that setting.

Given Wise’s hefty interaction with the pertinent literature and his familiarity with related topics, such as diglossia and orality theories, at least a brief note on M.A.K. Halliday’s anti-language hypothesis would have fit comfortably into the discussion, as would recent work on how literacy and orality interact to produce memory. Still, Wise’s accessible style, alternating as he does between winsome anecdotes and scholarly argument, and comprehensible statistical tables inserted periodically in support of his contentions, all cooperate in alignment with his central contention that natural language is inherently socially positioned and situationally sensitive. One may read in Greek, sign a contract in Hebrew and swear in Aramaic; issues of linguistic repertoire start to look more like matters of purpose, role and location, and the literacy of individuals may conform to, or diverge from, the characteristics that typify a general population. Given that a ‘book had to be *read*, not merely said...[m]any illiterates could and did participate in literary

culture in Judaea of those years' (p. 354). The complexities of multilingualism make for delicate considerations and carefully shaded conclusions, so the nuances of interaction between languages in classical times will be sure to generate ongoing discussion.

Jonathan M. Watt
Geneva College
Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania