

## The Jews of Yemen in light of the excavation of the Jewish synagogue in Qanī'

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### Summary

This paper draws attention to the genuine (i.e. not converted) Jewish community that lived in many localities all over the Himyari kingdom, such as Ṣafār, the capital of that kingdom, Ḥāṣī in the south, and Qanī' in the south-east. The various archaeological and epigraphic findings of the last fifty years illustrate a typical Jewish community of the time. The Greek inscription found at the synagogue in Qanī' has enriched our knowledge of the Jews of Ḥimyar, not only from the standpoint of new details that were obtained, but also by shedding light on certain anecdotes that were previously known by us but not fully comprehended. We may conclude that the Jewish community in the Kingdom of Ḥimyar — even prior to the Judaization of the kingdom — appears to have been a vital one, having all essential religious and social institutions, just as any other Jewish community in other countries.

**Keywords:** Jews, Yemen, Ḥimyar, Qanī', synagogues

### Introduction

The goal of the present paper is not to deal with the complicated subject of the Jewish nature of the Judaized Ḥimyari kingdom (c. AD 375–525), but to draw attention to the Jewish community that lived in many localities all over the country, such as Ṣafār, the capital of that kingdom, Ḥāṣī in the south, and Qanī'<sup>1</sup> in the south-east. The various archaeological and epigraphic findings of the last fifty years illustrate a typical Jewish community of the time that consisted of people who, for different reasons, emigrated to Yemen from the Land of Israel through north-west Arabia.

Our knowledge of the Jews of Yemen has been greatly enhanced due to the discovery of epigraphic inscriptions unearthed in Yemen itself, as well as in other places. This work began in 1936–37, when Binyamin Meisler (Mazar), revealed a system of tombs belonging to the Jews of Ḥimyar dating back to the third century AD at Bēt Šē'ārīm (today, Qiryat Ṭib'ōn) in northern Israel (Hirschberg

1946: 53–57, 283–284), and up to the recent publication of a c.600 BC Sabaic inscription by André Lemaire and François Bron, which indicates trade relations between the towns of Judea and Yemen (Lemaire & Bron 2009). These inscriptions have disclosed important details about our otherwise vague knowledge of matters mentioned in ancient Greek and Christian sources, as well as in Arab literature from the first centuries of Islam. It is worth noting that, inexplicably, Jewish sources have ignored altogether the existence of an ancient Jewish community in Yemen, excepting perhaps a few small hints that can only be understood by comparing other sources. Thus, Hirschberg has raised the supposition that at the beginning of the sixth century AD a political plan was devised, the participants of which may have included the Jewish settlement of the Land of Israel and the kingdom of Ḥimyar under the leadership of Yosef Dhū Nuwās (see Robin 2008; Gajda 2009: 82–108), against the Byzantine emperor who sought to bring Yemen under the rule of Christianity by way of the Ethiopian kingdom (Hirschberg 1967). This hypothesis is supported by the fact that a reference to the Jewish community in Yemen during the sixth century AD can be found in a liturgical poem written by El'āzār Ha-Qillīrī, a contemporary poet from the Land of Israel, as also in its apocalyptic theme relating to the insurrection of Sayf Dhū Yazan (see Chraïbi 1996; Gajda

<sup>1</sup> Arabic: قاني. This is the regular vocalization of this toponym but, as recently suggested by C. Robin, it should be Qanī' (قنيء) according to two medieval Yemeni sources (personal communication, February 2012). W. Müller insists, however, that the regular vocalization is the right one (personal communication, July 2012). See also Müller 2012a.

2009: 157–160) against the Ethiopian Christian governor in Yemen (Tobi 1996: 178–179).<sup>2</sup>

As great as the importance of this early sixth-century BC inscription is to us, namely in helping us to determine the possible beginning of a Jewish settlement in Yemen, it still does not shed any light on the nature of that settlement. Of far greater importance than this is the discovery of a Jewish synagogue in Qanī', dating back to the second half of the third century AD, as it sheds light on some issues that have never been known or discussed before (Bowersock 2010; Patrīch 2011). Special consideration will be given to the discovery of the synagogue at Qanī'. It should be noted here that Qanī' was of great economic importance, being mentioned in several ancient Greek and Latin sources (*Periplus Maris Erythraei*; Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*; Claudius Ptholmaeus' *Geography*) as the chief port city of Ḥaḍramawt and as the marketplace for trade in aromatic spices and condiments which passed through northern Arabia.<sup>3</sup>

As is known, comprehensive and monumental works about Judaism in Ḥimyar have already been carried out by C. Robin (2003; 2004; 2008), a central figure in the study of ancient Yemen, and by his student I. Gajda (2009: 245–247). My intention here, however, is to describe Yemenite Jewry from the third century AD to the beginning of the sixth century AD by looking at several parameters and relying upon epigraphic sources that have been disclosed by Russian, French, Italian, and German scholars since 1936–37, compared with ancient Jewish texts — the Bible and contemporary Talmudic and Midrashic literature.

We can also add the important contributions made in the study of Yemenite Jewry during that same period by scholars of our previous generation, H.Z. Hirschberg (1946: 50–111) and S.D. Goitein (1983: 333–344), even though they had at their disposal only limited epigraphic material. This they accomplished by way of their Hebrew publications, which did not usually find their way into studies pertaining to Western scholarship.

## The beginning of Yemenite Jewry

According to the tradition of the Jews of Yemen themselves, the beginning of their settlement in that country took place during the waning years that preceded the destruction of the First Temple, in 586 BC. This tradition appears to be corroborated by liturgical and linguistic data (Tobi 1986: 56–65). Along with this one must add, of course, the tradition that arises from the biblical narration itself on trade relations between the Land of Israel and Yemen, beginning but not ending with the days of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Nevertheless, these oral traditions and data were not and are still not accepted in scholarly circles as reliable scientific evidence. Subsequently, scholars of the previous generation were inclined to draw a connection between the first settlement of the Jews in Yemen and the Himyari tombs in Bēṭ Šē'ārīm; that is to say, either in the first or second century AD, a long enough period of time for the Jews of Yemen to become established in their new settlement, before sending their dead to be buried in the Land of Israel in the third century (Hirschberg 1946: 53–54). Then came the seal stone from the Himyari cemetery in Ṣafār, which shows a Torah Ark and which was believed to be the earliest evidence for the presence of Jews in Yemen as it was dated as early as the second century AD (Yule 2005: 28; 2007: 94–95). Afterwards came the inscription published by Lemaire and Bron (2009) mentioning trade relations between the Land of Israel and Yemen at the beginning of the sixth century BC, by which the beginning of the Jewish settlement there at that time, according to the Jewish Yemenite tradition, should not be ruled out. Of course, this may affect our attitude towards the many references in the books of the Bible to the Land of Sheba, including the story of the Queen of Sheba's epic visit to Jerusalem in the tenth century BC, although they cannot be accepted as real scientific evidence for contact between the two regions (Robin 1992–1996; Lemaire 2002; in press; Tobi, in press).<sup>4</sup>

## Ties with the Land of Israel

As concluded by Goitein (1983: 54), the Jews of Yemen were very close to their Jewish brethren in the Land of Israel during the period of Israel's Sages and beyond. In

<sup>2</sup> According to some Arabic sources Sayf Dhū Yazan was a Jew, a descendant of Dhū Nuwās (Hirschberg 1946: 108).

<sup>3</sup> It is tempting to say that this city was formerly called *Cannēh* (קננה), a place cited by the prophet Ezekiel (27: 23) in his prophecy about Tyre's international trade, and mentioned alongside other places in South Arabia: 'Ḥārān, and Cannēh, and 'Ēden ['Adan?], the merchants of Šēḫā.' See, for example, Aithie & Aithie 2009: 165, 170. The vocalization of the name of that town on an Arabic medieval map, however, is Qanī' (see n. 1) and according to what we know it was founded around the first century BC.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, for example, during a lecture on the ties between Yemen and the Land of Israel in the biblical period, at a conference held in Eilat, Israel, in January 2012, C. Robin dismissed altogether the authenticity of the story of the Queen of Sheba in Jerusalem.

fact, their cultural and social characteristics, which had by that time crystallized and been preserved until their demise in the middle of the twentieth century as a result of the founding of the State of Israel, were very similar to those of the Jewish society in the Land of Israel during the time of the Sages (second—fifth centuries). This determination, coming from one of the most important scholars of Yemenite Jewry, is verified by the many epigraphic findings from the third to the sixth centuries AD, as shown below.

The ties between Yemenite Jewry and the Land of Israel can be observed in the system of tombs at Bēt Šē'ārīm dating back to the third century AD. There, it was not such a rare occurrence that Jews from Ḥimyar sent the bodies of their relatives to be buried in the Land of Israel. Similarly, J. Naveh (2003) published a Sabaeo-Hebrew-Aramaic inscription, which was republished by W. Nebe and A. Sima (2004). This inscription, discovered near Šō'ar, a Jewish town bordering the western shore of the Dead Sea, was engraved over a Himyari tomb dating back to the beginning of the fifth century AD. The same scholar published another grave inscription in Šō'ar, regarding a Jew named Yōsēh (Yōsēf), 'who died in the city of Zafar, the Land of the Himyaris, and who had gone up [original Aramaic: *u-nfaq*] to the Land of Israel and was buried on Friday' etc. (Naveh 2003: 624).

At the time of Israel's Sages this was accepted practice among Jewish communities in the diaspora, just as it is well documented in the writings of Israel's Sages (Gafni 1977). Because of the hardships involved in transporting corpses across the vast desert terrain stretching from Yemen to the Land of Israel (more than 2200 km), Hirschberg (1946: 55) raises the suggestion that they were carried from one of the settlements, or stations, occupied by the Jews of Ḥimyar either in northern Arabia or in the southern borders adjoining the Land of Israel. Indeed, it is known that the Jews of Ḥimyar maintained contacts with the Jewish communities in north-western Arabia. Thus, for example, it is mentioned that at the time of the siege of Khaybar during the days of Muḥammad, two brothers from Himyar — Marḥab and Yāsir — displayed outstanding courage during their fight against the Muslims. In the above-mentioned inscription, however, it is unambiguously related that the buried person died in Yemen. In any case, based on the conventional custom in the Land of Israel at that time — which was, usually after one year had elapsed ('the time of gathering the bones'), to collect the bones of the deceased and transfer them to a sarcophagus located in a permanent burial site — we can assume that dead bodies were not being transported

to the Land of Israel for burial, but rather only their bones (Meyers 1970; Regev 2011).<sup>5</sup>

It is of great significance that Jews from Ḥimyar were being buried in a prestigious place, near the tombs of the Sanhedrīn. Although it was considered as an outstanding virtue not to be buried in foreign countries but in the Land of Israel, for some religious reasons we find that a certain Amōrā of the Land of Israel levels harsh criticism against the custom of bringing the deceased from the diaspora to be buried in the Land of Israel (Jerusalem Talmud, *Kētūbbōt* 66a): 'I say about them (Jer.2:7): "You have made my estate an abomination" — that is, during your lifetime; "and you have come and defiled my land," — that is, at the time of your death.' It seems, therefore, that the Himyaris were worthy of being buried there because in their lifetime they were known and respected in the eyes of those who dwelt in the Land of Israel, seeing that one of them, whose name was Menaḥem, was called by the epithet *qyl ḥmyr* (prince of Himyar), in the eight-character Himyari ligature, while in the Greek inscription he was called *Menae presbyteros* (Menaḥem, the community's elder). It is interesting to note that the name in Greek letters of a woman in the genitive form was also written, *Ευλογίαζ*, meaning either 'virtue', 'blessing', or 'gratis' (Hirschberg 1946: 56–57; 33, pl. b).<sup>6</sup>

As for the probable strong spiritual attachment held by the Jews of Ḥimyar for the Land of Israel, this is also attested to by an inscription bearing the names of the *mišmārōt* (priestly wards), which was initially discovered in September 1970 by W. Müller and then, independently, by P. Grjaznevitich within a mosque in Bayt al-Ḥādir, a village situated near Tan'im, east of Šan'ā'. This inscription has been published by several European scholars, but the seminal study was carried out by A.A. Urbach (1973), one of the most important scholars of rabbinic literature in the previous generation.

It should be noted that the priestly wards were seen as one of the most distinctive elements in the collective memory of the Jewish people as a nation during the period of Roman and Byzantine rule in the Land of Israel following the destruction of the Second Temple, insofar as they came to symbolize Jewish worship within the Land. This fundamental view often appears in liturgical

<sup>5</sup> This custom is frequently documented in the Talmudic-Midrashic literature, i.e. *Mišnāh*, Tractate *Sanhedrīn* 6:6; Tractate *Sēmāhōt* 12, chap. 12.

<sup>6</sup> C. Robin rejects the interpretation of the ligature *qyl ḥmyr*. He notes that today the inscription *Menae presbyteros* can no longer be seen. The only secured inscription is *Ōmēritōn* (the Ḥimyari) (private communication, June 2012).

poetry in the Land of Israel during the Talmudic period. Then, suddenly and in a most unexpected way, which until now had no plausible explanation, this memory reveals itself in the most tangible way; it has no other parallel in any of the Jewish communities in the diaspora, not even those in the Land of Israel. It is revealed in the form of a monumental inscription engraved on a huge stone pillar that was apparently placed in a Jewish synagogue in a fairly remote place. Hirschberg raised different hypotheses as to the time of the inscription and the social-historical context of its actual writing, and reached the conclusion that it dates back to the advent of Islam; while R. Degen and P. Grunfest tend to date the inscription to the fifth or sixth century AD (Hirschberg 1975: 152, 154). Hirschberg's main argumentation is the fact that the inscription is written in Hebrew script, while all Jewish inscriptions from previous times are in Epigraphic South Arabian characters and use the Sabaic language of the Himyarite kingdom.<sup>7</sup> Whatever it might be, there is no doubt that the stone inscription indicates a strong spiritual attachment of the Jews of Yemen to the Land of Israel in that period which preceded the advent of Islam.

### The distribution of Jewish settlements in Yemen

From the late seventeenth century AD, the area of Jewish settlements in Yemen had shrunk, thereafter becoming concentrated in the central highlands. It appears that in the first few centuries of the Common Era, however, even during the Middle Ages, Jewish communities were spread over a much wider area, as indicated by the Jewish inscriptions that were discovered in recent decades throughout Yemen. Then, the surprising disclosure of a Jewish synagogue in Qanī' showed that the extent of Jewish settlement in Yemen was much wider. From ancient Arabic sources we also learn that during the eve of the rise of Islam, a significant part of the population in Ḥaḍramawt were Jews or, to be more precise, proselytes to Judaism, especially the tribes of Yaz'an and Kindah (Lecker 1995; Frantsouzoff 1999). Furthermore, according to Ya'qūbī the Muslim historian (d. 897/8), all the inhabitants of Yemen were Jews on the eve of Islam. As a result of false messianic activity in Ḥaḍramawt towards the end of the fifteenth century AD, however, Jews were forbidden to live there, a prohibition that was eventually explained by the pretext that it was a

sacred land in which the ancient prophet Hūd had lived and worked (Goitein 1983: 135–138).

The boundary of Jewish settlement in the east also shrank. Since the late seventeenth century AD, the farthest east the Jewish community had settled was Tan'im, a distance of only 25 km east of Ṣan'a', and where the inscription bearing the names of the *mišmārōt* (priestly wards) was discovered. During the period of the Himyari kingdom, there were Jewish settlements situated still further to the east of Tan'im, extending at least to Ma'rib, the capital of ancient Sheba 100 km east of Ṣan'a' (see below, 'Synagogues').

In the north the situation was similar. As Goitein (1983: 19–23) has already pointed out, based on Cairo Geniza documents, at least until the tenth and eleventh centuries AD Jewish communities could still be found beyond Yemen's northern border, deep within the territory of what is now the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It goes without saying that Najrān, situated today in the confines of that kingdom, was an important Jewish centre long before the war of Yosef Dhū-Nuwās against the Christians at the beginning of the sixth century AD. Moreover, as Hirschberg (1946: 66–67) has pointed out, relying on the Christian sources, the Jewish settlement in Najrān preceded that of the Christian settlement there. Whatever the case, from a list of the places suggested by C. Robin (2003: 127) and where old Jewish inscriptions were discovered, or those belonging to proselytes,<sup>8</sup> we learn that most of the Jewish communities were concentrated around the central highlands of the country, exactly as it was in these last generations. This trend increased even more as a result of the expulsion of the Jews from their settlements in 1679, an event that became known to them as the Mawza' Exile, for when they returned from their exile after about a year and a half, they did not return to many of their former settlements, which were far away from the central part of the country (Tobi 1999: 78–80).

### Synagogues

As early as 1950, 'the ruins of a Jewish synagogue, dating back to the fourth century' were seen by W. Phillips 'at the foot of the citadel's wall' in Ta'izz (Phillips 1955: 196), although this testimony cannot be confirmed by any other archaeological evidence. Another interesting testimony is brought down by the late Rabbi Yōsēf Qāfiḥ (1989: 861):

<sup>7</sup> The Jewish and Judaized inscriptions from Yemen were collected by Robin (2004).

<sup>8</sup> From south to north: Qanī', Ḥāṣī, Nu'uz, Zafār, Bayt al-Ashwal, Tan'im, Bayt Ḥādir, Ma'rib, Ḍula', Rayda, Najr, Najrān.

'The city of Ṣan'ā' is built at the foothill of the mountain, *Jabal Nuqūm*, on its west side. On the top of this lofty mountain are the ruins of a not-so-large, fortified city which bore the name of *Barāsh*,<sup>9</sup> and which tradition avers used to be a Jewish city. When I visited there in 1937, I found a few remains of large stone walls still standing upon their ruin, as well as two ritual baths that had been carved out of the rock, and also the ruins of a synagogue with the compartment that once served as the Ark (*Hēkāl*). The walls were made of large stones, roughly eighty cm. and higher. I did not find there engraved stones with images or with writing. However, my grandfather told me that when the well-known Jewish researcher, Eduard Glaser, visited Ṣan'ā' in 1882, and who visited also the same area, he informed him that there were Jewish inscriptions there from the year 900 of the Seleucid Era. That is to say that in *anno mundi* 4349 (589 CE) Jews were already living in the town of *Barāsh*.'

Sabaic inscriptions which refer to synagogues (Sabaean: *Mkrb*) were discovered in the following places (from south to north): Ḥāṣī, c.16 km north-east of Bayḏā; Bayt al-Ashwal in the vicinity of Ṣafār, the capital of Sheba and Himyar, c.17 km south-west of Yarīm;<sup>10</sup> Nu'uz, c.35 km south-south-west of Ṣan'ā'; Najr, c.40 km north-west of Ṣan'ā'; Ḍula', several kilometres north-west of Ṣan'ā'; Ma'rib, 100 km east of Ṣan'ā'; Rayda, 49 km north of Ṣan'ā' (Robin 2003: 127). Synagogues were also built in Tan'im (*Msgd*) (Hirschberg 1975: 155–156; Müller 2012b: 37), in Najrān (Hirschberg 1946: 67), and in Qanī' — the port city in Ḥaḍramawt (Bowersock 2010; Patrich 2011).

The longest inscription and the most important one is in Ḥāṣī — dating back to the fifth century AD and first discovered by W. Müller — insofar as it contains, more than any other Sabaic inscription, rich information regarding the communal organization of the Jews in

<sup>9</sup> Barāsh is not on the top of Jabal Nuqūm, but on another mountain next to it, and on the top of which there are vestiges of an ancient castle.

<sup>10</sup> In an unpublished study, *Ṣafar, Watershed of Pre-Islamic Culture*, co-authored with Katharine Galor, P. Yule identified an underground structure excavated in Ṣafār as a Jewish *miqwāh*. It should be borne in mind, that a *miqwāh* — along with a synagogue and a cemetery — is indispensable for any Jewish congregation. In a personal communication (16/9/2012), however, P. Yule wrote: 'I no longer am so keen on the idea of the mikva in Ṣafar and have changed somewhat my argumentation. But the existence of *payot* at that time is certainly still valid.' On the sidelocks of the Jews of Yemen and the bust with remnants of a sidelock excavated by P. Yule in Ṣafār, see Tobi 2005–2006.

ancient Yemen. We shall mention here only two things: (1) the establishment of a separate cemetery for Jews alone, excluding Gentiles, in accordance with the codes of Jewish law; and (2) the Hebrew name of the synagogue — Ṣūr'ēl (Tobi 2007).

### The Jewish synagogue in Qanī'

The discovery of the synagogue at Qanī' is of singular importance. As has already been noted by J. Patrich (2011), there is a striking similarity between the structure of this synagogue and the structure of Jewish synagogues in Ṣan'ā', which are situated a great distance (in time and space) from Qanī'. From this similarity we learn about the unity and continuity within the Jewish settlement of Yemen and can probably draw conclusions about other matters as well, such as social structure and the pronunciation of the Hebrew language.

Another issue of concern comes from the fact that, within this synagogue, there is a relatively long (five lines) Greek inscription, in which a man named Kosmas petitions the *One God* (εἰς θεός) to protect the *holy place* (ἅγιος τόπος), and his *συνοδία* (a word translated by Vinogradov [2010: 390] as 'caravan', but which Bowersock [2010: 395] translates as 'religious association'). From its inclusion of the expression εἰς θεός, Bowersock reasons that it was a Jewish synagogue, rather than a Christian church. It is notable that the inscriptions at the Himyari tombs in Bēt Šē'ārīm are in Greek, next to an interlacing of Epigraphic South Arabian script and they, too, contain the expression εἰς θεός. Even the words ἅγιος τόπος happen to be a translation for the Aramaic expression, ארתא קדישא ('the holy place'), and are found in many classical Jewish texts, such as the *Qaddīs*.

This inscription raises the question about the exposure of the Jews of Himyar to Greek culture. Patrich (2011: 104) supposes that the use of Greek suggests that Kosmas, the author of the inscription, was a merchant who had come from abroad, rather than one of the local people. On the other hand, Hirschberg (1946: 54) states that the Greek names of the Himyaris buried in Bēt Šē'ārīm prove that either they or those who buried them were influenced by Greek culture. Nevertheless, he goes on to say, 'since in Yemen there have not been uncovered any remains of Greek inscriptions, we may assume that the men who were buried in Bēt Šē'ārīm were influenced by Greek culture in the countries adjoining northern Arabia. Therefore, we are compelled to say that the Himyari chamber in Bēt Šē'ārīm was the burial site of a Jewish community in one of the Yemenite settlements in North Arabia.' Now

that the Greek inscription has been revealed in Qanī', however, we have no need of such explanations as to the presence of Greek culture among the Jews of Ḥimyar.

The epigraphic texts thus far discovered prove that some Himyari Jews used Hebrew, Aramaic, and Sabaic, including a Hebrew and Aramaic component within the Sabaic (Tobi 2007: 48–49). We also now know that knowledge of the Greek language and its culture was widespread among them, or at least among some of them.

The existence of a Jewish synagogue in Qanī' may also have an economic significance. As noted above, it was the main shipping port on the Indian Ocean, serving navigation to both East Africa and India. On the other hand it was the first station along the Incense Route, going from there in a northerly direction to Shabwah and Ma'rib and thence to Yathrib, Khaybar, Taymā', and other localities in north-west Arabia, in all of which there were Jewish communities. This strengthened the view that Jews of Ancient Arabia took an active role in the trafficking of incense from South Arabia to the Near Eastern countries.

In short, the Greek inscription found at the synagogue in Qanī' has enriched our knowledge of the Jews of

Ḥimyar, not only from the standpoint of newly obtained details, but also by shedding light on certain anecdotes that were previously known by us but not fully comprehended. We may conclude that the Jewish community in the Kingdom of Ḥimyar — even prior to the Judaization of the kingdom — seems to have been a vital one, having all essential religious and social institutions, just as any other Jewish community in other countries.

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