Abstract and Keywords

This article discusses the physical contexts of Jewish death during the Roman period and tries to determine if people believed in the afterlife. It describes the monumental tombs of the late second temple period. It observes a relevant transition that occurred in Jerusalem and its environs sometime during the late first century BCE. It introduces the concepts of ossuary burial and charnel burial, and examines the Jewish burial practices during late antiquity.

Keywords: Jewish death, afterlife, monumental tombs, ossuary burial, charnel burial, burial practices

1. Introduction

No area of Jewish life in the Graeco-Roman period is better represented in archaeological and literary remains than death. It is no wonder, then, that death, burial, and the afterlife in the history of Roman-period Judaism has interested scholars since the beginning of modern academic research (Bosio 1632, vol. 1: 141–143). An underlying catalyst for this interest in ancient Jewish death, which is far more intensive than the usual antiquarian interest in funerary issues, is the continuing Christian concern with the ‘death, burial and afterlife’ of the most famous Jew of the first century, Jesus of Nazareth (c. 4 BCE–C. 32 CE). Christian and Jewish scholars have combed ancient Jewish literary sources and scoured the Holy Land for clues to interpret one of history’s most significant burials. Often these scholars have been quite successful, leading to significant discoveries and interpretations (e.g. Charlesworth 2006). Fascination with ancient Jewish death as a window into the world of Jesus and the early church goes unabated, as is well illustrated by the recent popular tempest stirred by the supposed ‘James ossuary’ and the fictitious (and
Amedia-driven) ‘Tomb of Jesus’ in the Talpiot area of southern Jerusalem (Byrne and McNary-Zac 2009).

Modern excavation of Jewish tombs in the Land of Israel began with L. F. De Saucy’s exploration of the burial complex of Queen Helena of Adiabene in Jerusalem in 1863, which De Saucy erroneously identified as the ‘Tomb of the (biblical) Kings’ (De Saucy 1865: vol 1: 345–410, vol 2: 188–9, 309–11). Working in tandem, scholars in mandatory Palestine, at first motivated by Zionist notions of digging up their ‘Old-New Land’, were active in the excavation and interpretation of Jewish burial sites—beginning with N. Slouschz’s excavation of the ‘Tomb of Zechariah’ in 1925, and the pioneering work of E. L. Sukenik, his students Maximillian Kon, Nahman Avigad, and others (Kon 1947: 73–79; Avigad 1954; Mazar et. al. 1973–1976). As with the current case of the so-called ‘James ossuary’ and the ‘Talpiot Jesus Tomb’, even legitimate scholars have been overly zealous in supplying popular American Christian piety, and along the way darkened their legacies—the first, and most famous, being E. L. Sukenik himself (Sukenik 1947: 351–365; 1947b esp. 79).

Since the founding of modern Israel in 1948, and especially since the 1967 Six-Day War, Israeli archaeologists have provided important resources for the study of death in Roman Palestine, particularly during the latter Second Temple period. Together with a host of site reports, major studies have recently been produced, at the forefront works by R. Hachlili (2005), A. Kloner and B. Zissu (2008), J. Levison (2002), L. Y. Rahmani (1994), and Z. Weiss (1989). The study of Jewish death during the Roman and Byzantine periods has often been broadened to include the wider issues of ‘death, burial and afterlife’ in ancient Judaism, in Roman culture and early Christianity, enhancing the academic conversation.

The introduction of death as a historical subject paralleled renewed interest in ‘end of life’ issues in Europe and North America. The first major study of the history of death was penned by prominent Annals scholar Phillippe Arles, with his monumental L’homme devant la mort (1977, tr. The Hour of Our Death, 1985), though Arles did not deal with Jewish death. His student, Sylvie-Anne Goldberg, began the process of rectifying this lacuna in a case study translated in English as Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Ashkenazi Judaism in Sixteenth through Nineteenth Century Prague (Goldberg 1996). David Kraemer has recently moved toward a history of death in rabbinic literature, with reference to archaeology and broader historical issues (Kraemer 2000).

The history of death in Judaism must be viewed within a still larger frame than Jewish literary and archaeological sources alone. By the Roman period—and even earlier—Jews were an integral part of the ethnic mosaic of the Graeco-Roman world. They had
inculturated the mores of the Roman East, of which they were part and parcel. Like all of
the nations of the eastern Empire, Jews integrated with the culture of Greece and Rome
in ways that were unique to them. This included fealty to laws and traditions associated
with their ancestral faith, behaviours that Roman authors often both reviled and
respected. Responding to both internal and general stimuli, Jews absorbed, rejected,
transformed, and amalgamated with general culture in ways that were both complex and
ongoing (Fine 2005a: 53–9). This model of inculturation is well expressed in all
areas of culture relating to Jews, and in particular in the area of death, burial, and
afterlife. My purpose here is to discuss a few pregnant examples where archaeology and
texts can be read together profitably for writing a ‘specifically Jewish ethnography of
death’ in Roman Palestine, to adapt Pierre Nora’s solicitous formulation (Goldberg 1996:
preface).

Archaeological evidence for the history of burial tends to be monumental. In general, the
tombs of the rich, or the near rich, attract attention. The tombs of the poor and unknown
are generally preserved in small numbers, if at all. Jewish funerary architecture is
preserved from the Hasmonian and Roman period in Jerusalem and environs, roughly
from the second century BCE to 70 CE, and again in the third to fifth or sixth century CE Bet
She’arim catacombs in the Lower Galilee (Vito 1996: 115–146). In both the earlier and
later cases, members of the Jewish elite participated in the general funerary architecture
of their times. In fact, one would be hard pressed to distinguish the distinctly Jewish from
general late Hellenistic and Roman funerary architecture, and even the specifically
Jewish elements may well be seen within the contours of the general practice.

Perhaps most interesting in both first century Judaea and at Bet She’arim are the ways in
which Jews chose to express their distinctiveness by adopting and adapting well-known
Graeco-Roman models. The same may be said of the far less monumental, though
infinitely interesting, Jewish cemetery at Zoar, on the south-eastern shore of the Dead
Sea. To date, more than forty tombstones have been found in secondary use in Zoar
(Misgav 2006). Uniquely, the Zoar inscriptions are part of a far larger corpus of Byzantine
Christian inscriptions from this site, which number more than 420 examples, and stretch
over three centuries. Thus, contextualization of the Zoar inscriptions may be deeply
focused upon the local context.

In what follows I shall highlight places of interconnectedness and disjunction between
archaeological and literary sources, allowing the discussion to be led on the basis of the
archaeological and literary sources that exemplify the physical contexts of Jewish death
in the Roman period—with an eye toward evidence of belief in the afterlife in each of
these contexts.
2. Monumental Tombs in Late Second Temple Period Judaea

In his polemical treatise, *Contra Apionem*, Josephus describes Jewish burial customs in ways that well reflect both Jewish and Roman customs: ‘The pious rites which it [the Torah] provides for the dead do not consist of costly obsequies or the erection of conspicuous monuments. The funeral ceremony is to be undertaken by the nearest relatives, and all who pass while a burial is proceeding must join the procession and share the mourning of the family. After the funeral the house and its inmates must be purified.’ (Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, 2.205; Levison 2002: 247). Josephus' own writings reveal, however, just how commonly Jews created monumental and costly show tombs during the latter Second Temple period. This phenomenon parallels archaeological discoveries over the last two centuries.

The earliest known Jewish burial monument was constructed by Simon the Hasmonaean, who ruled Judaea between 143 and 134 BCE. Simon constructed a magnificent tomb complex for his family in their ancestral home at Modi‘in in the Judaean Shephelah (Fine 2005a: 60–81). No longer extant, this tomb is described in great detail in 1 Maccabees 13:27–29: ‘And Simon built a monument over the tomb of his father and his brothers; he made it high that it might be seen, with polished stone at the front and back. He also erected seven pyramids, opposite one another, for his father and mother and four brothers. And for the pyramids he devised an elaborate setting, erecting about them great columns, and upon the columns he put suits of armor for a permanent memorial, and beside the suits of armor carved ships, so that they could be seen by all who sail the sea. This is the tomb which he built in Modi‘in; it remains to this day.’

This is the earliest example of Jewish monumental funerary architecture of the Graco-Roman period, and clearly served as a model for later monuments. The tomb complex described here is thoroughly Hellenistic in conception. Maximilllian Kon suggests a reasonable reconstruction of the Hasmonaean complex: ‘It was apparently a very high rectangular structure built from ashlars which served as a base for the upper story of the monument, consisting of seven base structures in the form of towers surrounded by pilasters and crowned by pyramidal or conical tops. The wall-surfaces between the pilasters were decorated with reliefs of weapons and ships’ (Kon 1971: 53). The most important precursors include the famous Mausoleum at Halacarnassos in Asia Minor, dating to the fourth century BCE, and the Belevi monument, located close by. Monuments topped with pyramids have been discovered throughout the Levant. Among these are the first century BCE Tomb of Hamrath at Suweida in Syria, where shields and other military
implements appear among the decorations of the tomb—just as is described in 1 Maccabees. The monumental tombs at Hermel and Kalat Fakra in Lebanon are also important parallels (Berlin 2002: 141–7; Fedak 1990: 140–50).

Monumental funerary monuments topped with ‘pyramids’ were a common feature of late Hasmonaean and Roman Jerusalem (Berlin 2005). Two are extant from Hasmonaean Jerusalem: the ‘Tomb of Jason’ in western Jerusalem (see Fig. 24.1), and the so-called ‘Tomb of Zechariah’ in the Kidron Valley south-east of the Temple Mount (Rahmani 1967: 61–100; Avigad 1954: 73–132; see Fig. 24.2).

![The Tomb of Jason, Jerusalem](Click to view larger)

*Fig. 24.1* The Tomb of Jason, Jerusalem

Photo: Steven Fine
The nearby ‘Tomb of Absalom’ and the ‘Tomb of the Kings’ both dating to the Roman period, are crowned with conical ‘pyramids’, reminiscent of Roman monuments at Pompeii and elsewhere (see Fig. 24.3). Like the Hasmonaean tombs, the ‘Tomb of the Kings’ was crowned with multiple ‘pyramids’, in this case, three (Kon 1947: 73–79; Fine 2003: 233–41). Josephus described this feature in the context of the internment of Queen Helena of Adiabene some time after 50 CE: ‘Monobazus sent her bones and those of his brother to Jerusalem with instructions that they should be buried in the three pyramids that his mother had erected at a distance of three furlongs from the city of Jerusalem’. L. Feldman suggests that the three pyramids were ‘presumably for Helena and her two sons, Izates and Monobazus’ (Josephus, Ant. 20.95; See also Josephus, Bell. 5. 55, 119, 147, tr. Thackery et al. 1926–1965). Remnants of these conical ‘pyramids’ were uncovered by Kon (1947: 73–9).
The decorations of the Hasmonaean tombs, described by 1 Maccabees as including armor placed upon columns and ‘carved ships’, is consistent both with Hellenistic iconography and the art of the Hasmonaean and Herodian periods. The First Maccabees description of the Hasmonaean tombs is quoted with minor variations by Josephus, who, significantly, leaves out the decorations described in 1 Maccabees—perhaps a sign that such imagery was not acceptable to Josephus and some of his contemporaries (Ant. 13. 211–213). Imagery of this sort was all but unknown in Roman Jerusalem, which may contextualize Josephus’ decision to elide this imagery—which could well have been removed by his time (Fine 2005a: 73–81).

No archaeological or literary sources provide evidence for rituals that took place in relation to the monumental tombs of Jerusalem. The imposing monumental staircase (9 metres wide) leading down to the so-called ‘Tomb of the Kings’, significant water installations (for ritual bathing?), and a broad plaza before the well-carved tomb (26 x 27 metres and carved to a depth of 8.5 metres into bedrock), suggest that the tomb of Queen Helena of Adiabene may have witnessed some sort of public ceremonial (Kon 1947). The same may be said of the smaller courtyards before monumental tombs elsewhere in Jerusalem and in the Jericho necropolis. Josephus’ portrayal of Herod’s funerary procession to Herodium expresses the high point of Roman lavishness practised by the ruling class of Judaea in the Roman period (Ant. 17.196–200. See also: Josephus, Bell. 1.670–2:2. On the recently discovered Tomb of Herod at Herodium see Netzer/Kalman/Porat 2008):

They then made preparations for the funeral of the king. Archeleus saw to it that his father’s burial should be most splendid, and he brought out all his ornaments to accompany the procession for the deceased. Herod was borne upon a golden bier studded with precious stones of various kinds and with a cover of purple over it. The dead man too was wrapped in purple robes and wore a diadem upon which
a gold crown had been placed, and beside his right hand lay his sceptre. Round the bier were his sons and a host of relatives, and after them came the army disposed according to the various nationalities and designations..., and they were followed by five hundred servants carrying spices.

John Levison has shown how closely Josephus' descriptions of Jewish funerary practices correspond with Roman practices and ideals. A part from occasional references to specifically Jewish customs, such as seven-day mourning periods in this text, Josephus's descriptions of Jewish customs in the present—as well as in biblical treatments, are fully in line with Roman ideals (Levison 2002: 270–2). Levison astutely notes the lack of imagines in this description of Herod's funeral procession. Imagines, 'people wearing masks' of the deceased, his ancestors, and other prominent Romans, do not appear in Josephus' rendition, even though these were a common feature of aristocratic Roman funeral processions. Levison attributes this lack of images to specifically Jewish sensibilities against human images, and Josephus does not seem above ignoring art that did not fit his notion of Jewish 'anti-idolism'. In light of Herod's care not to infringe upon this 'anti-idolic' impulse throughout his reign, Levison is probably right (Levison 2002: 273–5; Fine 2005a: 73–81). While reflecting Josephus' apologetic intention, the reality described by Josephus could not have been too far from the truth.

Those at the pinnacle of Jerusalem's social hierarchy were buried in stone sarcophagi, which were rare during this period. Many were decorated with floral patterns. This was the case of Herod's sarcophagus, fragments of which have been identified at Herodium. A large sarcophagus uncovered in the 'Tomb of the Kings', now at the Louvre, is inscribed 'Sadah [or: Sadan] the Queen' in Hebrew and Aramaic, and is generally thought to belong to Helena of Adiabene (Hachlili 2005: 121, 168). A mere seventeen extant stone sarcophagi from Jerusalem are enumerated by R. Hachlili (Hachlili 2005: 115–126). Simple wooden exemplars were preserved in the dry climate of Jericho and elsewhere in the Dead Sea region (Hachlili/Killebrew 1999: 62–62; Hachlili 2005: 75–94).

Images of pyramidal monuments appear as decorations within less-aristocratic Jewish contexts. Monuments similar to the 'Tomb of Zechariah' are incised as decorations on ossuaries from Jerusalem, and images of pyramidal monuments appear as decorations in the necropolis of Jericho (Hachlili 2005: 346–353). The image of a monument crowned by three pyramids is incised on a recently published ossuary (Fine 2003). We cannot know whether, along with the obvious 'drip down' of imagery from the tombs of the upper aristocracy, the pyramidal tomb had some unique ideational significance that made it attractive for Jews. Be that as it may, the ubiquitoussness of this imagery is clearly expressed in the archaeological record of first-century Jerusalem, a point noted by Michael Avi-Yonah, who, in constructing his scale model of Herodian Jerusalem at the
Holyland Hotel in Jerusalem (now at the Israel Museum), imagined a city where pyramidal monuments punctuated the skyline (see Wharton, 2006: 219–22).

### 3. Ossuary Burial in Herodian Period

**Jerusalem and its Environs**

A significant transition took place in Jerusalem and its environs sometime during the late first century BCE. The Jerusalem elite moved from burial in charnel pits to secondary burial. An excellent example of this transition is the ‘Tomb of Jason’, constructed at the beginning of the first century BCE (Rahmani 1967; Avigad 1954: 73–132). At first, bodies were placed in individual loculi (Hebrew: kohkim) to decompose, and later the bones were deposited in a charnel pit. In around 20 BCE charnel burial was discontinued, and ossuary burial became the norm. Ossuary burial became a common mode of interment among the elite, according to L. Y. Rahmani, between 20 and 15 BCE (Rahmani 1994: 21–22). Ossuary burial continued in southern Judaea and the Galilee into the third century CE.

Secondary burial was not unique to elite Jews during the Roman period. Significant numbers of ossuaries have been discovered, for example, in western Asia Minor, and date to roughly the same period (Magness 2005: 135–136). Magness notes that ‘closer to Judaea, the Nabatean cemetery at Mampsis in the Negev yielded an ossuary containing bones wrapped in linen’ (ibid. 135). She elides the fact, noted by A. Negev, that ‘the “ossuary-type” tomb contained a coin from year 4 of Rabbel II (74 CE)’ (Negev 1993: 892). Ossuary burial does not necessarily reflect Jewish dependence upon Nabataean burial customs. It could also reflect the opposite—or perhaps a parallel development. Further study of ossuary burial in Nabataean contexts is a desideratum.

It seems that for Jews, the advantage of ossuaries was the fact that they allowed for a monumentalized form of burial, in the Roman mode, for a community that was religiously averse to the common Roman custom of cremation. Ossuary burial allowed for increased individualization in burial at a time when individuals of stature were making themselves known for their Graeco-Roman style euergetism in the Jewish public realm—particularly in the Temple—and Jewish authors were increasingly writing in their own names rather than resorting to a pseudepigraphic impulse. Ben Sira is an early example of this practice. For the first century, Philo of Alexandria, Josephus, and the apostle Paul are obvious examples. It is certainly correct that ‘the practice of recording name(s) on ossuaries should be understood as reflecting a concern for recording and preserving the
memory of the deceased. The preservation of the names of ancestors was of great importance to the upper classes and priestly families, and above all the high priestly families, who based their social standing and claims of legitimacy on their lineage’ (Magness 2005: 136). It should nonetheless be noted that just 25 per cent of the 895 ossuaries from the State of Israel collections published by L. I. Rahmani contain inscriptions, and many of these are simple familial identifiers like *imma*, ‘mother’, and *abba*, ‘father’ (Rahmani 1994). Significantly, ossuary and sarcophagus inscriptions were generally written in a most non-monumental manner, quickly and often haphazardly. One would have expected more impressive inscriptions if claims of ‘legitimacy’ were the primary goal.

It is significant that ossuary burial began roughly at the time when Herod the Great began his massive reconstruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. His reconstruction of the Temple, which began c. 20–19 BCE, coincides with Rahmani’s dating of the origins of ossuary burial in Jerusalem between 20 and 15 BCE. From an economic standpoint, this is the factor that facilitated the transformation. A corollary was the rise of a well-trained community of stone masons. The fabrication of stone ossuaries was predicated upon this industry, just as it was for the fabrication of stone containers, tables, and the like (cf. Magness 2005: 139). In fact, Y. Magen dates the rise of the stone industry to within thirty years of the first ossuaries, about 50 BCE (Magen 2002; Miller 2003).

The relationship between sarcophagi, ossuaries, and the general stone carving industry is confirmed by the high level of decoration of many of the extant sarcophagi and ossuaries, which parallels in its workmanship other utilitarian objects like tables, as well as the geometric plans of mosaic pavements. Mosaics from the northern palace at Masada, with their depictions of the rosette surrounded by frames of geometric design, are an obvious parallel, as are the monumental bas reliefs from the Temple Mount’s southern Hulda Gate, and rosette decoration in the synagogue of Gamla (Hachlili 1988: 1–25). Particularly significant are images of funerary monuments and of other monumental buildings on the exteriors of ossuaries, which bring important aspects of the new architectural cityscape of late Hasmonaean/Herodian Jerusalem into the crypts themselves. One group of ossuaries, for example, reproduces in a schematic fashion the borders that are so typical of Herodian masonry in its depiction of an ashlar wall (Hachlili 2005: 370–3; Rahmani 1994: 35). Others present images of colonnades with columns whose capitals bear close resemblance to Herodian capitals, and of building facades of the sorts that were constructed, not only in the necropolis, but along the byways of Herodian Jerusalem as well.
A link between ossuary burial and benefaction to the Temple is expressed archaeologically. An ossuary discovered in a monumental tomb on Mount Scopus (now at the British Museum) is inscribed in Greek: ‘The bones of the sons [or: descendants] of Nicanor the Alexandrian, who made the doors’, followed by ‘Nicanor Alexa’ in Aramaic (Hachlili 2005: 172–3; see Fig. 24.4). These gates were remembered and their legend embellished by the rabbis centuries later, who recalled that Nicanor of Alexandria had donated gates of Corinthian bronze to the Temple (M. Yoma 3:9-10; T. Yoma 2:3-4; Jacobson/Weitzman 1992: 237–248). Together with the ossuary of ‘Yehohana daughter of Yehohanan, son of Thophlos, the high priest’ and of the family of the high priest Caiaphas, the Nicanor ossuary is an indicator that the wealthy and well-connected Jews used this form of burial during the first century (Rahmani 1994: no. 881; Greenhut 1994: 219–222; Reich 1994: 223–225. Note also a recently discovered sarcophagus fragment labelled ‘son of the high priest’, Haaretz 2008). An ossuary belonging to a contractor, builder, or donor to the Temple construction project (we cannot know which), one ‘Simeon, builder of the sanctuary’ closes the circle (Hachlili 2005: 173; Rahmani 1994: no. 200). Ossuary burial served Jerusalem's elite at least from the time of Herod the Great onward, an elite that was intimately involved with the Temple and Herod’s project of rebuilding Jerusalem.

Scholars have debated the religious significance of ossuaries, often asserting that ossuary burial was popular among Jews as a reaction to theological developments. Literary sources from the Second Temple period are not particularly useful for interpreting the ideational context of Jewish burial during this period. It is suggested that Pharisaic notions of bodily resurrection discussed by Josephus, the New Testament, and rabbinic sources sparked the use of ossuaries among Jews. Later rabbinic sources are often marshalled in support of this theory, although no rabbinic tradition actually points toward this explanation. Rather, this modern academic trope is intertwined with the Christian concern with salvation.

The ossuaries of ‘Yehohana daughter of Yehohanan, son of Thophlos, the high priest’ and of the family of Caiaphas, the high priest of Jesus’ trial who, in Acts 5:15, is linked to the
party of the Sadducees, reflect a situation in which Jews who were seemingly not Pharisees used ossuaries for secondary burial (Rahmani 1994: no. 881). This is particularly problematic, as the literary sources report that Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (Stemberger 1995). There is no reason to suggest, as some have done in order to resuscitate the Pharisee thesis, that non-Pharisees adopted Pharisaic burial customs in a culture in which Pharisaic customs were supposedly the norm (Rahmani 1994: 53–54). In fact, J. Patrick has suggested persuasively that the all-important aqueduct system of first-century Jerusalem was constructed according to Sadducean and not Pharisaic norms (Levine 1997: 114; Patrich 1982: 25–39).

Later rabbinic discussion of ossuary burial does not assume that this mode was particularly Pharisaic or rabbinic, but only that Jews did it, and that the practice required discussion and some minor rabbinic regulation. Secondary burial in ossuaries was an element of what E. P. Sanders calls the ‘Common Judaism’, that is, the religious koine or general Jewish culture of Second Temple period Judaea (Sanders 1992: ix; Fine 1997: 8–9). More than that, Jewish funerary monuments and secondary burial fit well within the contours of general burial practices in the eastern Mediterranean during the Roman period.

Literary sources of the Second Temple period make no mention of ossuary burial, though rabbinic literature provides some contextualization. These rabbinic sources are often cited, particularly by archaeologists, as the Sitz im Leben of archaeological discoveries (e.g. Rahmani 1994). Mishnah Baba Batra 6:8 discusses loculus burial in a manner that fits well with first-century archaeological remains:

He who sells a piece of property to his fellow to make him a [family] tomb, and similarly, he who receives a piece of property from his fellow to make him a [family] tomb, makes the interior of the cave four by six cubits, and excavates within it eight niches: three on one side, three on the other side, and two opposite them. And the niches will be four cubits long, and their height seven [handbreadths], and their width six [handbreadths]. Rabbi Simeon (ca. 150 C.E.) says: Make the interior of the cave six by eight cubits, and excavate within it thirteen niches: four on one side, four on the other side, three opposite them, and one to the right of the opening, and one at the left. And make a courtyard at the opening of the cave, six by six [cubits] the size of the bier and those entombing it and excavate within it two caves, one on one side and one on the other. Rabbi Shimon says: Four, one on each of its four sides. Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel says: All depends upon the nature of the stone.
In fact, later rabbinic readers of this and associated texts successfully imagined and drew schematic drawings of this form of burial that parallel the archaeological reality (cf. the commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot on b. Baba Batra 101a). Rabbinic sources provide some inkling of the ritual and ideological experience of ossuary burial. So for example, Mishnah Moed Qatan 1:5 (cf. Kraemer 2000: 343–5; Rahmani 1994: 54): ‘Further said Rabbi Meir (c. 150 CE): A person collects the bones of his father and mother [during the intermediate days of a festival], because it is gladness to him. R. Jose says at time of: It is a time of mourning for him’. The Talmud Yerushalmi expands upon Rabbi Meir’s comment, contextualizing the manner of internment that the Mishnah takes for granted: ‘Further said Rabbi Meir: A person collects the bones of his father and mother [during the intermediate days of a festival], because it is gladness to him (M. Moed Qatan 1:5); at first they would bury them in mounds [of soil]. When the flesh had decayed, they collected the bones and buried them in secret. That day he would mourn, and the following day he was happy, for his fathers rested from judgment’ (y. Moed Qatan 1:5, 79d–80a). How much these texts—and other rabbinic comments—reflect the first-century reality cannot be determined. They provide a real glimpse, however, into how a somewhat later literate group of Roman-period Jews, the rabbis, reflected upon, and seemingly experienced, a custom that was uninterrupted—though diminished—from the time of Herod the Great until tannaitic times.

The development of monumentalized burial in Roman Judaea, particularly in the area of Jerusalem, is a function of the Graeco-Romanization of the Jews—I avoid calling this phenomenon ‘Hellenization’, a neologism dichotomized with ‘Judaism’ that bears such heavy baggage as to render it almost unusable (see Rajak 2001b). Jews used the same types of monuments as non-Jews during this period, just as their Temple was reconstructed by Herod in the architectural lingua franca of the age of Augustus. As with the decoration of the Temple, Jewish funerary art refrained from imagery that could be construed as ‘idolatrous’, and thus unacceptable from a Jewish standpoint. This had in no way impacted upon Simon Maccabee’s general choices in building and decorating the Hasmonaean tombs, nor those of subsequent generations.

Abstaining from possible ‘idolatry’ was the distinctive element that marked these structures as ‘Jewish’. Ossuaries appeared at about the same time as Herod’s building projects, as Jerusalemite elites chose to be buried as individuals amongst their family groups rather than being simply ‘gathered to their fathers’ in charnel pits. The choice of ossuaries—usually stone, but sometimes wood or ceramic—was facilitated by general Graeco-Roman practices. Ossuary burial was an upscale Graeco-Roman way of being interred in the eastern Mediterranean region. At the same time, it allowed wealthy Jews to maintain Jewish family ties intact and support communal religious strictures against idolatrous imagery and, above all, cremation.
4. Jewish Burial Practices in Late Antiquity

The mid-second-century patriarch, Shimon b. Gamaliel, is well known for critical attitudes toward ostentation in burial practices. According to y. Sheqalim 2:7, 47a, ‘Rabbi Shimon b. Gamaliel says: Monuments (nefashot) are not built for the righteous. Their words are their memorial’. The similarity between this statement and Josephus’ comments in Contra Apion 2: 205 is quite remarkable. Examples of Jewish monumental tombs from the second half of the second century, the lifetime of this sage, are not extant. The same may not be said for later decades—the most prominent example being the apparent tomb of Rabbi Shimon’s son, Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, at Bet She’arim.

While numerous Jewish tombs have been uncovered from late antiquity, no monumental Jewish necropoleis have yet been uncovered in Palestinian cities with large Jewish populations, including Bet Guvrin, Caesarea, Sepphoris, and Tiberias—nor are necropoleis in these places discussed in rabbinic or non-Jewish sources (Weiss 1989). The necropolis of Bet She’arim is the outstanding exception (Mazar, et al. 1973–1976; Stern 1993–2008: 236–248; Levine 2005: 197–225). Its twenty-four excavated burial units stretch to the west and south of the ancient town, near the juncture of major east-west and north-south traffic arteries at the foot of Mt. Carmel and overlooking the western Jezreel Valley (the New Testament’s ‘Plain of Armageddon). The significance of this massive complex for the local economy cannot be doubted, as dedicatory inscriptions discovered within the large local synagogue commemorate the euergetism of Jews who worked in the funerary industry. Thus we hear of ‘Rabbi Samuel who arranges (the limbs of the dead)’ and Judah who lays the corpse (Mazar et al. 1973–76, vol. 2: 189–90; Alon 1983: 2: 109–10; Weiss 1992: 363).

Bet She’arim is already mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud as a burial place for Jews from Caesarea, and elsewhere as the final resting place of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, the supposed editor of the Mishnah (Safrai 1983: 71–85; Mazar 1985: 293–299; Rajak 2001a: 483). Bet She’arim, identified as such in these literary sources and in a Greek inscription found at the site, perhaps because of the round Roman arches of the facades of catacombs 14 and 20, was a major Jewish necropolis from the third to the fifth centuries CE. Jews with origins as distant as Antioch on the Orontes, Palmyra, Nehardea in Sassanian Babylonia, and Himyar in Arabia were interred at Bet She’arim. Palestinian Jews, together with Jews with origins in nearby Phoenicia (Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, Byblos) predominate. The regional pull of these catacombs is unique in late Roman-period Jewish burial. Scholars have debated the reasons for the prominence of this cemetery as a preferred burial place for Jews of the late Roman and early Byzantine periods. Some have
pointed to its significance for Diaspora Jews, both those who immigrated to Palestine themselves (as in the case of members of the ‘synagogue of the Babylonians’ in Sepphoris (y. Shab 6:1, 8a; Roth-Gerson 1987: 107, discusses other Diaspora communities), and those who had their bones transported to the Holy Land for secondary burial. Literary sources preserve discussions of bone transit, even from as far away as Babylonia, and burial in the soil of Palestine was seen by some to ameliorate past sins (Gafni 1999: 73-95).

The current ‘master narrative’ of Bet She’arim focuses on the presence of rabbinic figures in catacombs 14 and 22, and particularly the apparent burial of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and his family in catacomb 14. According to this approach, Jews are thought to have been brought from throughout Palestine and the Diaspora to be interned near the sages and their leader (e.g. Levine 2005). While this may be the case, the obvious projection from the present to the past should occasion caution—as Tessa Rajak has argued forcefully (Rajak 2001a). Bet She’arim has served as a kind of ancient parallel to Arlington National Cemetery, Westminster Abbey, and most importantly, Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem. This approach to Bet She’arim has a long history in Zionist thought and public ritual. A significant parallel to this understanding of Bet She’arim is the first century ‘Tomb of Nicanor’, which was transformed into a modern Zionist necropolis in 1934, when proto-Zionist thinker Leon Pinsker was buried in what was by then the botanical garden of the Hebrew University, followed in 1941 by Zionist, Menachem Ussishkin (Vilnay 1978a: 5171; see Fig. 24.5)

In a sense, Bet She’arim was treated as a secularized and ‘Zionized’ parallel to the ‘Tombs of the Sanhedrin’, a large necropolis in northern Jerusalem that was so designated by medieval Jewish pilgrims, which appeared on Israeli paper money minted from 1958 onwards and was labelled ‘Tombs of the Sanhedrin’ in Hebrew (Vilnay 1978b: 6475-9) It should be remembered that the excavator, Benjamin Mazar (later president of the Hebrew University, 1953–1961), was a significant member of the Zionist academic elite, the son-in-law of scholar, Zionist leader and future president, Izhak Ben Zvi.
During the last quarter of the twentieth century the question of rabbinic authority, so rife within liberalizing elements of American Judaism, has often focused on the question of rabbinic status at Bet She’arim. Constructing a counter-narrative of rabbinic marginality, some scholars tend to minimize the status of rabbis at Bet She’arim, preferring to see it as an assemblage of wealthy Jews, some associated with a more Hellenized patriarchate that was separating from a distinct ‘rabbinic class’ and others bearing the title ‘Rabbi’, but not necessarily identical with those mentioned in rabbinic literature (Cohen 1981: 1–17; Levine 2005: 204–211. On this phenomenon, see also Miller 2004: 27–76; Fine 2005a: 35–46).

My own sense is that the catacombs at Bet She’arim served a broad range of very wealthy Palestinian and eastern Diaspora Jews. ‘Rabbis’ contiguous with those of rabbinic literature, especially those associated with Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, were buried there in rather tight communities. As Alexei Sivertsev has shown, this would be expected from the household model of organization that seems to have been adopted by the rabbinic community (Sivertsev 2002). While most Jews memorialized their dead in Greek, rabbis did so mostly in Hebrew and Aramaic (see Hezser 2001: 385-86). The wealthy Jews who developed the household and communal catacombs (or just bought graves within larger complexes) at Bet
She’arim apparently did so, at least in part, for reasons of status and/or piety. Rabbis were buried there as members of the patriarchal household (see Fig. 24.6).

Would the presence of rabbis have been a draw to other Jews? One could imagine so, though this is nowhere expressed in the mostly short texts of grave markers. I recall, though, with intentional glibness, that in our own day the presence of Al Jolson, Jack Benny, and other Hollywood luminaries at Hillside Memorial Park in Los Angeles adds lustre to that cemetery, though few would be buried there in order to be close to these culture heroes. More seriously—Jews in later generations made considerable efforts to be buried in close proximity to rabbinic ‘holy men’, and Christians contemporaneous to Bet She’arim made far more determined efforts to be in proximity to their ‘holy men’ (Brown 1981; Reiner 1988). One could imagine that the presence of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and the rabbinic ‘household’ added to the attractiveness of Bet She’arim as part of the mix that attracted at least some Jews to this hillside in the Lower Galilee (see Fig. 24.7).

Architecturally, there is nothing ‘Jewish’ about the tombs at Bet She’arim. Were the many menorahs, Aramaic inscriptions and Jewish references removed, this could be mistaken for a general Roman-period necropolis—though the relative conservatism of catacomb art, when compared with non-Jewish tombs, may reflect a Jewish aesthetic similar to the conservatism of Jewish catacomb art in Rome (Fine 2005a: 128–9; Weiss 1996: 360–1). The presence of imagery with no Jewish connection whatsoever, like an imported sarcophagus from cave 11 bearing the image of Leda penetrated by Zeus in the guise of a swan, represent the exceptions that prove the rule. This imported sarcophagus, together with other imported sarcophagi decorated with the image of a mounted combatant, human figures with togas, and the head of an Amazon, was procured for burial in this Jewish necropolis. The fact that the Leda sarcophagus was subjected to iconoclastic behaviour and then turned around so that the offending image could not be seen suggests a more conservative response by

Bet She’arim provides a few explicit indications of belief in the afterlife. Scholars differ over the question of how significant this theme was in ancient Judaism (Fischer 1978: 236; Nagakubo 1974; Rutgers 2000: 293-310). Jewish funerary inscriptions, particularly in Aramaic, seldom include a gushing forth of expression of such sentiments, though literary sources show that notions of the afterlife were central to Jewish belief and much discussed during this period (Moore 1958, vol. 2: 279-287). An inscription in catacomb 11 invokes a curse against the eternal life of anyone who disturbed the grave: ‘I Hesychios, lie here with my wife. May anyone who dares to open [the grave] above us not have a portion [menos] in the world to come [{bion}aonio(n)]’ (Mazar et al. 1973-76, vol. 2: 112-13). Questionably, Schwabe connects the threat of losing one’s ‘portion in the world to come’ with M. Sanhedrin 10:1: ‘All Israel has a portion in the world to come’ (ibid. 113). As Schwabe notes: ‘The importance of this inscription lies in the fact that it gives expression to the belief in eternal life’.

Some scholars have tried to attach specific meanings to imagery decorating the catacombs—particularly menorahs, images of Torah shrines, conch shells, animals, and ships. Does the fact that amoraic literature imagined the existence of synagogues and study houses in the world to come affect the interpretation of Torah shrines flanked by menorahs on sealing stones of burial kokhim (Mazar et al. 1973-76, vol. 1: 110-113; Fine 1997: 120)? While menorahs and Torah shrines were Jewish identity markers, do they represent eschatological beliefs? Does a man with a menorah balancing on his head (cave 3) mean anything special, or is it just an oddity (Goodenough 1953-1967, vol. 1: 92; vol. 2: 93)? We cannot know, just as it is doubtful that any particularly Jewish meaning can be given to the images of (Charon’s?) sailing vessel found at Bet She’arim (Goodenough, 1953–67, vol. 1: 97; vol. 3: figs 77–8). This is all very standard, if sparse, Graeco-Roman funerary iconography, with the addition of Jewish ethnic markers. Over-interpretation of this material has been rife during the last half century, particularly among historians of religion who developed ‘mystical’ and ‘non-normative’ approaches to these ‘symbols’ without reference to the very local uses to which this imagery was put by Jews (e.g. Goodenough 1953–67; Smith 1957–8: 473−512; Kraemer 2000: 49−71; Urbach 1958: 189−205).

A second important archaeological resource for the history of Jewish death is a corpus of approximately forty tombstones discovered in secondary use near the village of Ghor es-Safi in Jordan, at the south-eastern corner of the Dead Sea. Identified as biblical Zoar (Zoora) in Byzantine times, the Jewish inscriptions discovered represent approximately 1/10th of the more than 420 inscriptions found in secondary use at this
site. The Christian corpus of 382 exemplars was recently published by Y. Meimaris and K. Kritikalau-Nikolaropoulou (2005), allowing for broad contextualization of the Jewish epitaphs. Jewish tombstones began to appear during the 1920s, and thirty-one have thus far been published (Naveh 1995, 1999, 2000; Cotton/Price 2001, Misgav 2006: 35–46). Another ten or so unpublished examples are known from private collections in New York and Israel. These date to the time between the mid-fourth and the late sixth century CE. Like many of the Christian tombstones from this site, Jewish epitaphs were painted with ochre pigment, or incised, or both on small limestone slabs that measure approximately 40 x 30 cm, with some a bit larger, others a bit smaller. Some of the incised Christian tombstones were polychrome (Meimaris/Kritikalau-Nikolaropoulou 2005, no. 150, 246, pl. viii), and I would not be surprised if the same had been true for some inscribed Jewish exemplars. All of the Christian inscriptions were composed in Greek (Meimaris/Kritikalau-Nikolaropoulou 2005), while the Jewish ones were mainly written in Palestinian Aramaic, one being bilingual and one being Greek memorializing an ‘archisynagogos’, a synagogue leader (Meimaris/Kritikalau-Nikolaropoulou 2005: no. 7, 99–101). The Jewish Aramaic inscriptions present the name of the deceased, the day and month of death according to the Jewish calendar, and the year of death dating from the destruction of the Temple and according to the sabbatical cycle. They often end with the word ‘Shalom’ and other formulae. The Jewish Greek inscriptions use formulae known from Christian epitaphs.

Jewish Aramaic epitaphs are far more formulaic than Christian exemplars from Zoar, though some development over time is noticeable. A typical example, dating to 438 CE, reads: ‘This is the tombstone (nafsha) of Hannah daughter of Ha[nie?] the priest, who died on the Sabbath, the first festival day (yoma tava) of Passover, the fifth day of the month of Nissan, in the fifth year of the sabbatical [cycle], which is the year three hundred and sixty-nine years since the destruction of the Temple. Peace. May her soul rest. Peace’ (tr. Misgav 2006: 37, with minor corrections). Below the inscription is the image of a menorah (seven armed candelabrum), flanked on the right by a shofar (horn) and lulav (palm branch), and on the left by a Torah shrine. The amount of information on these tombstones is unique for Jewish epitaphs from antiquity, but parallels in length Christian formulae at Zoar. Mention of the sabbatical date and the date of the Temple’s destruction is well documented in inscriptions and documents from this period, and the reference to peace, shalom, at the end of the inscriptions appears in both burial and synagogue inscriptions elsewhere. Images of menorahs, Torah shrines, lulavim (palm, myrtle, and willow bunches) and etrogim (citrons), often flanked by birds, appear in the bottom margins of a number of the stones. This is the only imagery used by Jews. Christians had a far wider repertoire in a similar location, and the most common Christian image is that of a cross flanked by birds (Meimaris/Kritikalau-Nikolaropoulou 2005: 10–13). Three later Jewish epitaphs, dating to 415, 454, and 458 CE conclude with
an explicit eschatological longing that draws on Isaiah 52:7, ‘He will awaken to the voice of the harbinger of peace’ (Naveh 1999: 620–623, nos. 19, 20, 22). Though the Jewish tombstones from Zoar provide Jewish content in a Jewish language, together with Jewish symbols, they are broadly consistent with Christian practice and form a definite sub-category of general burial practice at Zoar during late antiquity.

5. Conclusion

The ethnography of Jewish death in the Graeco-Roman period awaits full exposition. While scholars have focused on archaeological sources, the analysis of literary sources and their comparison from an interdisciplinary perspective and the writing of a synthetic history of Jewish death in antiquity have just begun. In this essay I have sketched some directions that this narrative may take.

Relatively little related to eschatological interests appears in the archaeological record. I am in full agreement with Rutgers in his assertion that references to life after death in Jewish epitaphs dating to the late antique period may very well turn out to be more apparent than real. For that reason, I believe that, in the end, the ‘what-we-cannot-prove-we-cannot know-approach: is much less common-sensical than it appears at first blush’ (Rutgers 2000: 307). This approach, so widespread in American scholarship of the latter twentieth century, does not convey the depth of how little we truly know—and understand, about ancient Judaism from the limited sources at our disposal. Much work is left to be done, if this fascinating area of Jewish cultural history in the Roman period is to be awakened from its slumber, and death in late antique Judaism is to be understood comprehensively.

Suggested Reading

Kloner and Zissu (2008) provide a general introduction to Jewish burial remains from the Second Temple period. This book provides an excellent introduction to the topic when paired with Hachlili (2005). The collection edited by Byme and McNary-Zak focuses on contemporary Christian interest in ancient Jewish burial through the lens of the so-called ‘James ossuary’. Second Temple literary sources on burial practices are best dealt with by Levison (2002), whose main interest is Josephus, and McCane (2003) whose focus is on New Testament studies. For the later Roman period, the final reports of the Bet She’arim excavation (Mazar et al. 1973–1976) are still the best introduction in
English, especially when read together with Weiss (1989, 1992), who provides a
discussion of significant literary sources relating to burial practice. The Zoar inscriptions
are discussed briefly by Misgav (2006), and Kraemer (2000) assembles rabbinic sources
on death and the afterlife.

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