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The Babatha papyri, Masada, and Rome

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NAPHTALI LEWIS (ed.), *JUDEAN DESERT STUDIES: THE DOCUMENTS FROM THE BAR KOKHBA PERIOD IN THE CAVE OF LETTERS, GREEK PAPYRI* [Aramaic and Nabataean Signatures and Subscriptions, ed. by Yigael Yadin and Jonas C. Greenfield] (Israel Exploration Society, Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1989). Pp. xii + 149, 40 plates. ISBN 965-221-009-9.

HANNAH M. COTTON AND JOSEPH GEIGER (edd.), *MASADA II, THE YIGAEEL YADIN EXCAVATIONS 1963-1965. FINAL REPORTS: THE LATIN AND GREEK DOCUMENTS* [with a contribution by J. David Thomas] (Masada Reports, Israel Exploration Society, Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1989). Pp. x + 238, 48 plates. ISBN 965-221-011-0.

Introduction

These two large and beautifully produced volumes belong together in certain ways. Both appeared in 1989 under the auspices of the Israel Exploration Society, and both contribute substantially to our knowledge of the Roman Near East in the period from Vespasian to Hadrian. Both present discoveries made about a quarter of a century ago by the late Yigael Yadin. The documents on papyrus from the Cave of the Letters in the Judaeen Desert were recovered in early 1961, and the Masada material — papyri, ostraca, *tituli picti*, graffiti, and amphora stamps — in 1963-64 and 1964-65. If the Society has not been swift in publishing these finds, it has certainly compensated for the delay by the lavishness and high technical quality of the publications. Yet, despite the similarity in the production of these two books, there is an arresting difference: the documents from the Cave of the Letters are texts of enormous historical importance, replete with interesting problems, whereas the Masada items are largely, with a few major exceptions, what Louis Robert used to call *débris*. Paradoxically the Masada book is considerably larger than the Cave volume. If the Cave documents had been interpreted with the same amount of detail as the Masada texts, the volume would have been grotesquely large. So one is grateful to Naphtali Lewis and Jonas Greenfield for concise expression and controlled elucidation. It would have been better if Hannah Cotton and Joseph Geiger had felt similar constraints. We do not need, for example, more than 50 sumptuous pages recording texts of only a few letters each.

The archive of Babatha in the Cave of the Letters

What we do need, however, is the rest of the documents from the Cave of the Letters, and it is the publication of that find that I wish to examine in detail first. What Yadin found in 1961 was nothing less than a private, portable archive in the possession of a Jewish woman called Babatha, who lived in both Arabia and Judaea. When she went into hiding in a cave in the Judaeen Desert during the revolt of Bar Kokhba and subsequently died there, she had with her a group of personal documents in Greek, Nabataean, and Aramaic spanning the period from 94 (in Arabia under the last Nabataean king) to 132. The Lewis-Greenfield volume was originally to have included all the Babatha material. But, when Greenfield's edition of the principal Semitic texts was delayed, Lewis proceeded to publish separately all the Greek papyri which had been entrusted to him, together with Greenfield's brief annotations on the Nabataean and Aramaic subscriptions on those papyri. This means that 10 documents, out of a total of 37, are missing from the present publication. One of the 10 is to be a republication of the scraps published by J. Starcky in *Revue Biblique* 61 (1954) 161-81 ("Un contrat nabatéen sur papyrus"), inasmuch as this item was undoubtedly extracted from Babatha's cave by scavengers in the decade before Yadin arrived. But for this we have at least the photographs and provisional readings that Starcky provided, and it is clear that they are highly relevant to the Greek documents. It is equally clear from Yadin's own detailed account of the Semitic texts he found in 1961 that they too must be interpreted in close conjunction with the Greek texts: see *Jaarbericht ex Oriente Lux* 17 (1963 [1964]) 227-41.

Regrettably, because Greenfield's editions were not ready, Lewis chose to provide almost no correlative evidence for his documents from the Nabataean and Aramaic papyri (although excerpts had