



A Jewish Vow for the Salvation of the Severans from Qazion

Photo Mariana Salzberger, COURTESY ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY”.



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[3]

A group of Jews dedicates a vow to the salvation of Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Geta and Iulia Domna. It belongs to a building project of controversial nature.

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Vow

Original Location/Place: Qazion, in Galilee

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Garden of the residence of the president of Israel in Jerusalem

Date: 198 CE to 211 CE

Physical Characteristics:

Lintel, irregularly carved, with the right side broken and the central section damaged. The name of Iulia Domna was inserted in a wreath and a line was deliberately erased.

Material: Limestone

Measurements: 125 centimetres in height, 60 in width and 60 thick. Letters are between 5 and 6 centimetres tall.

Language: Greek

Category: Roman, Greek, Jewish

Publications: *SEG* 8.12 [*IGRR* III.1106, *CIJ* II.972]. The inscription will also be published in the forthcoming V volume of *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*.

Commentary: This inscription is a direct testimony from the ancient lands of Israel mentioning Roman emperors (see Di Segni, *Dated Greek*). It is also a clear attestation of messages of the Roman imperial cult surviving from the rural areas of the province of Palestine. Finally, the text is unequivocal about the participation of a group of people identifying themselves as Jews in the early Severan period. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the stone – already reported in the 19th century – has sparked numerous debates about its interpretation and significance (e.g. Schwartz, *Imperialism*, p. 131).

The controversies mainly stem from the fact that the inscription was not discovered on its own, but actually as an integral element of a larger archaeological complex, the remains of which are still visible today. The site is called Qazion and is located in the eastern part of Upper Galilee between the town of Safed and the synagogue of Meroth [<https://pleiades.stoa.org/places/678285> [4]]. Since its discovery it has not been extensively excavated and, only



recently, detailed surveys and prospections have been conducted by R. Hachlili and A. E. Killebrew, who were also able to recover the inscribed lintel. Such building materials have been considered to belong to a religious complex; the controversy resides in the nature of the sanctuary. Since the 19th century, two trends have split between those who interpreted it as a temple of the imperial cult and those favouring a synagogue. Even after the joint efforts of Hachlili (“A Galilean Riddle”) and Killebrew (“Qazion”), these archaeologists have not been able to find an agreement. From their common conclusions, nonetheless, one point is clear: the site resembles the architectural traditions of the Roman Middle East, particularly in the Hauran, between the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE.

The model of the inscription is likewise not so different from the epigraphic habit of better-documented areas in the Levant. It contains a type of vow (????/euchê) for the salvation (???????/sôtêria) of the Roman rulers that became particularly common in Syria and Arabia (see Moralee, “For Salvation’s Sake”). In the case of Qazion, it is dedicated to Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta who are described as Emperors (????????????/Autokratores) and Caesars (????????/Kaisares). This denomination places the inscription between 198, year of Caracalla’s and Geta’s accessions, and 211 CE when Septimius Severus died. The name of the empress (????????/Sebastê) Julia Domna was also added inside a wreath on the left side of the inscription which fits in this chronological framework. The original editor suggested the presence of another wreath on the right side that would contain the name of Fulvia Plautilla, wife of Caracalla from 202, but this cannot currently be validated given the more fragmentary state of the stone after its rediscovery (see Harvey, “Appendix”). The scholarly opinion has instead tried to connect the setting up of the vow with the presence of Septimius Severus and his family in the Levant, either before the end of the Parthian war in 197 or after their victory and subsequent journey toward Egypt, when both Cassius Dio (76(5).13.1) and the *Historia Augusta* ([Historia Augusta, Life of Severus XVI.8-XVII.1](#) [5]) record their passage through Palestine (see Birley, *Septimius*, p. 133-135). The latter problematic source even reports that Severus “granted numerous rights to the local communities” and Jerome’s *Chronicle* (47.211) lists a Jewish and Samaritan war in which the emperor might have favourably intervened in favour of the Jews. While this connection is therefore plausible, it should not be taken at face value from the sole content of our inscription. Indeed, it has been proven that materials connected to the emperor such as statue bases were not always set up as a result of imperial visits (see Højte, “Imperial Visits”). For example, the arch of Aelia Capitolina dedicated in Latin to the Severan family probably dates between 202 and 205 (*CIL* I.719). With regard to salvation vows for this dynasty in the Middle East, an inscription from Gerasa is securely dated to 207 CE (*SEG* 35.1572), a year in which the imperial family was residing in Rome and preparing their campaign to Britain (see Halfmann, *Itinera*, p. 219, 222-223).

And yet, even without an exact date for our inscription or certainty about the nature of the building to which it was attached, there is an important aspect that remains undoubted. Namely, the vow was put up by people identifying themselves as Jews (????????/Ioudaioi, l. 6). The attestation of groups – also with religious purposes – in such inscriptions is not unprecedented, as shown for example by the aforementioned testimony from Gerasa which was prepared by an association of Artemis devotees. In the Diaspora, there are also two other inscriptions from Intercisa (*ILS* 3981=*CIJ* 677) and Mursa (*IJO* I.5) in Pannonia recording vows to the Severan emperors and, in Egypt, there is even evidence of vows on behalf of king Ptolemy already in the Hellenistic period (*CIJ* II.1443-4). The case of the vow in Qazion is more complex because groups of Jews in the province of Palestine are only sparsely attested in epigraphs after the Bar Kokhba revolt. Indeed, our Jewish sources for this period are mostly limited to the particular account of rabbis, some of which appear to have populated the area of Galilee (see Goodman, *State and Society*). While the most important centres such as Tiberias or Sepphoris were located in the south, there are also some indications of Jewish presence in the northern area of Qazion (y. Betzah 5:5, 63b), which have been confirmed by the discovery of our inscription. The real trouble is to reconcile the mostly negative image of Rome conveyed by Palestinian rabbinic sources with a contemporary testimony which was set up by neighbouring Jews and vowed for the salvation of the entire imperial family. From this apparent paradox, interesting but largely unresolved questions may be asked. Did the opinions of the rabbis differ so substantially from the daily lives of the Jews in Qazion? Was the Severan a period of reconciliation between the Jews and Rome after their previous failed revolts? Were the Jews actively participating in the cult of rulers so well spread across the Roman Empire by the 3rd century CE? Or did the Jews need to inscribe such vows and pretend obedient reverence before they could be allowed the construction of a significant synagogue?

This brief commentary cannot take on issues which define our very understanding of the relationship between Roman and Jews in the land of Israel during the high imperial period. These answers need to be approached from a comparison with the wide array of sources present in this website analysing the contact and impact of Roman power on other provincial societies. For this purpose, this vow shows that the epigraphic medium used by these Galilean Jews did not substantially differ from what neighbouring provincial communities were inscribing in the same period. Even the name of Geta was erased after the *damnatio memoriae* of the emperor in 211. Likewise, the surviving remains do not allow to identify – even after detailed surveys – the type of building in which the inscription



was inserted because they resemble the general building features of the Roman Levant. Qazion might, after all, pose numerous riddles; yet these can only be solved by understanding a multifarious Empire that achieved to create consensual realities in terms of architectures, ideologies and inscribed messages.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords:

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- [Geta](#) [23]
- [Julia Domna](#) [24]
- [Imperial family](#) [25]

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Moralee, Jason, [For salvation's sake': provincial loyalty, personal religion, and epigraphic production in the Roman and late antique Near East](#), *New York* [33] (New York: Routledge, 2004)

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Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

[Aphrodisias, Divine Kinship and the Accession of Septimius Severus and Caracalla \[35\]](#)



Septimius Severus and Caracalla confirm the privileged polity and laws of Aphrodisias, a city that celebrated their dynastic victories and was closely related to the empire of Rome.

- [Read more about Aphrodisias, Divine Kinship and the Accession of Septimius Severus and Caracalla](#) [35]

Inscription

[Mylasa, its local coins and the long life of the Severan emperors](#) [36]

A typical city in Asia Minor drafts a resolution concerning illegal banking activities and local legal procedures. The fragmentary decree includes an acclamation and several messages extolling the Roman emperors and the eternity of their rule.

- [Read more about Mylasa, its local coins and the long life of the Severan emperors](#) [36]

Inscription

[Iulius Saturninus and the abuses of Roman soldiers in Syria under Commodus](#) [37]

The Roman governor responds to a complaint raised by a village in southern Syria that suffered illegal exactions despite having a guest house for soldiers.

- [Read more about Iulius Saturninus and the abuses of Roman soldiers in Syria under Commodus](#) [37]

Inscription

[The Jews, Proselytes and God-fearers of Aphrodisias](#) [38]

Subscription list of an organised group of Jews in Aphrodisias (Asia Minor) including proselytes and god-fearers.

- [Read more about The Jews, Proselytes and God-fearers of Aphrodisias](#) [38]

Inscription

[A God-Fearer and the Menorah of Sardis](#) [39]

A god-fearer called Aurelius Hermogenes donates a menorah to the synagogue of Sardis in response to (the gifts of) providence.

- [Read more about A God-Fearer and the Menorah of Sardis](#) [39]

Inscription



[The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis \[40\]](#)

A funerary inscription sets fines to the community of Jews residing in Hierapolis (Phrygia). A copy was to be deposited in the archive of the Jews.

- [Read more about The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis \[40\]](#)

Inscription

[Donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus to the synagogue of Stobi \[41\]](#)

A Roman citizen is considered “father of the synagogue” in Stobi (Macedonia) and donates rooms after conducting his life “according to Judaism.”

- [Read more about Donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus to the synagogue of Stobi \[41\]](#)

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Realized by:

[Aitor Blanco Pérez \[42\]](#)



Source URL: <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/jewish-vow-salvation-severans-qazion>

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- [3] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/b-305417.jpg?itok=xbBVtOLP>
- [4] <https://pleiades.stoa.org/places/678285>
- [5] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/historia-augusta-life-severus%C2%A0xvi8-xvii1>
- [6] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%CE%B5%E1%BD%90%CF%87%CE%AE>
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