Psalms 135:25 in Symmachus' Translation on a Jewish Inscription from Nicaea (Iznik)*

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In memory of my teacher
Professor Abraham Wasserstein

The text

In 1943, Alfons Maria Schneider published an underground Turkish fountain, Böcek ayasmasi, from the city of Iznik, ancient Nicaea. A marble block, which makes one of the borders of the fountain basin, carries an inscription engraved under a big menorah — 'hoher Kandelaber mit sieben Armen' — and therefore described by Schneider as Jewish. He dated the text from the second century C.E. and printed it with restitutions by Josef Keil:[1]

ὁ] διδοὺς ἀγ[α-
θ]ὸν τῖ πάσι σ-
αρκί, ὅτι εἰ[ς
ἐῶνα ἔλεο[ς
αὐτοῦ.

Schneider related this text to the Psalms 135:25, quoting for comparison the standard version of the Septuagint: ὁ διδοὺς τροφὴν πάσῃ σαρκί, ὅτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ. Unfortunately, Schneider provided no photograph.

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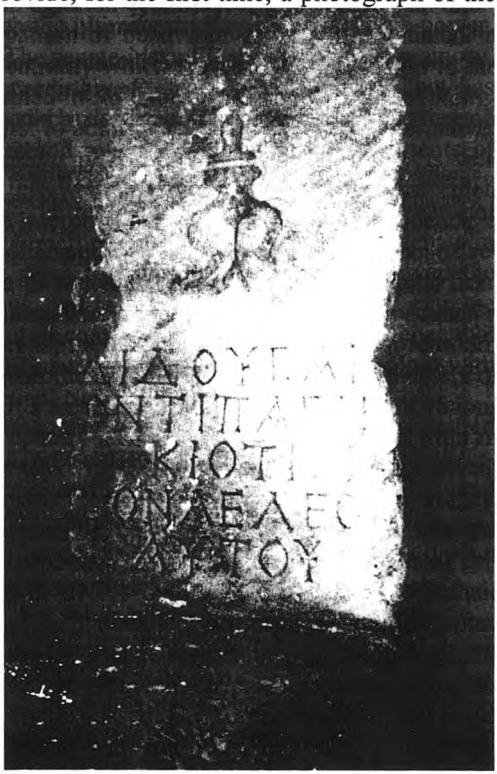
* I am grateful to Prof. Menachem Kister (Jerusalem), whose stimulating remarks prompted me to pursue the study of the inscription, and to Dr. Annie Pralong (Paris), who most kindly provided the photographs for this publication and who discussed with me a preliminary version of the text. An anonymous reader for *Scripta* brought to my attention the study by S. Fine and L.V. Rutgers, who have anticipated one of my corrections to the text and whose contribution it would have been a shame to miss.

1 A.M. Schneider, *Die römischen und byzantinischen Denkmäler von Iznik-Nicaea* (Istanbuler Forschungen 16), Berlin 1943, 36, cf. 17.

Keil's text has been reproduced in the *Bulletin épigraphique* (1946-1947, no. 89), and later in Sencer Şahin's corpus of Iznik, with the addition of a schematic (and rather misleading) drawing of the menorah but, again, with no photograph.[2] The monument has been re-edited by Steven Fine and Leonard Victor Rutgers who provide, for the first time, a photograph of the text, correct its reading — ἄρ[τ]/ον instead of ἀγ[α/θ]ὸν — and study at length the menorah-type represented on the stone.[3] Independently, the monument has been studied by Annie Pralong, who reproduces Keil's text but is mostly concerned with a previously unnoticed decoration on the stone (*infra*).[4] Dr Pralong provides several good photographs of the marble block (which she also most kindly supplied for the present publication).



The photographs now available allow a further revision of Keil's reading. The left margin of the inscribed surface has suffered very little damage and does not allow for a restitution of even one letter. Thus there is

2 S. Şahin, *Katalog der antiken Inschriften des Museums von Iznik (Nikaia)* I (Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien 9), Bonn 1979, p. 295a, no. 615.

3 S. Fine and L.V. Rutgers, 'New Light on Judaism in Asia Minor During Late Antiquity: Two Recently Identified Inscribed Menorahs', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 3, 1996, 1-23, in abbreviated form in Hebrew by idem, '"New" Menorah from Turkey — New Light on Jews in Asia Minor During the Roman-Byzantine Period', *Qadmoniot* 31/2, 116 (1998), 123-5.

4 A. Pralong, 'A propos d'un bloc de marbre d'Iznik', in *ΕΥΨΥΧΙΑ. Mélanges offerts à Hélène Ahrweiler* II (Byzantina Sorbonensia 16), Paris 1998, 603-609, with 9 figures.

no definite article before διδοὺς. It should also be noted that Fine and Rutgers, while reading correctly ἄρ[τ]/ον, misconstrue the following τι as an enclitic indefinite pronoun. Thus they present Keil's reading as ἀγαθόν τι, translated 'something good', but provide no translation of the corrected text.[5] Obviously, Keil himself — as his accentuation shows — understood τῖ as a misspelled definite article τῇ. The text can now be presented as following:

διδοὺς ἄρ[τ-
ον τῖ πάσι σ- read τῇ πάσῃ
αρκί, ὅτι εἰς
ἐῶνα ἔλεο[ς read αἰῶνα
αὐτοῦ.

Fine and Rutgers observe, correctly, that the reading ἄρτον, bread — instead of the spurious ἀγα[θό]ν or even of the Septuagint's τροφὴν — brings the text closer to the Hebrew original: נותן לחם לכל בשר כי לעולם חסדו. They also indicate, citing Origen's *Hexapla*, that this word is used by both Aquila and Symmachus in their respective translations of the psalm.[6] A closer verification shows that the translation διδοὺς ἄρτον (without the definite article) for the beginning of the verse belongs to Symmachus, a late second-century translator of the Bible; Aquila's version is ὃς δίδωσιν ἄρτον.[7] The Christian commentators of the Psalms, whose excerpts are, with very few exceptions, our only source for Symmachus' text, did not preserve his rendering of the rest of the verse, but εἰς αἰῶνα, without the article τὸν, turns out to be his regular way of rendering לעולם.[8] Thus there is hardly a doubt that the inscription from Iznik provides for the first time the complete translation by Symmachus of Psalms 135:25.

The stone

Our inscription appears on a neatly cut rectangular block of white Proconnese marble measuring 67 x 29 x 22 cm. The block's present position in the

5 Fine and Rutgers (n. 3), 6-7. Another minor confusion, which needs to be corrected in passing, concerns the authors' identification of the late Turkish fountain as a 'baptismal pool' (5).

6 Fine and Rutgers (n. 3), 7.

7 G. Mercati, *Alla ricerca dei nomi degli 'altri' traduttori nelle omilie sui salmi di S. Giovanni Crisostomo e variazioni su alcune catene del salterio* (Studi e testi 158), Vatican 1952, 88.

8 J.R. Busto Saiz, *La traducción de Símaco en el libro de los Salmos*, Madrid 1978, repr. 1985, 184.

fountain allows only two sides to be seen. The second visible side also carries an inscription, published several times, which commemorates the construction of a city tower (of Nicaea) by the emperor Michael. This text belongs to a series of five very similar inscriptions, one of which carries a date, 'year 6366 (A.M.)' = 857/8 C.E., thus identifying the emperor in question as Michael III (842-867). There is no need to argue here a point admitted by all, to wit that the use of the marble block in the city wall under Michael III represents a re-employment of the stone adorned with the Jewish inscription.[9]

Dr Pralong was the first to observe that the side of the stone, presently occupied by Michael III's dedication, carries an ornamental design which had been mostly erased before the dedication was engraved. She describes the technique as *champlevé* and the design itself as a circle of 22 cm in diameter, filled with three concentric rows of triangles with, possibly, a Greek cross in the middle. The photograph of the decorated part of the stone and a partial reconstruction, published by Dr Pralong, provide a good idea of the design. An array of stylistic parallels adduced by Dr Pralong situates the design in the eastern Mediterranean context of the fifth-sixth centuries.

Dr Pralong further argues that this decoration represents a distinct stage in the existence of the stone. She dates the Jewish inscription in the fourth century (rightly observing that the second-century date proposed by Schneider is, paleographically, way too early), and the circular design — which she tentatively assigns to the decoration of a church — in the centuries that follow, before the stone was re-employed under Michael III. Since several parallels for the decorative pattern come from Cyprus, the author suggests that the church in question may have belonged to immigrants from Cyprus, settled by Justinian II near Cyzicus in 692; the decoration would then date from the late seventh century.[10]

In our view, this intermediate stage in the employment of the stone should be eliminated. The decorative circle appears, in fact, at the same level as the branches of the menorah on the next side of the stone. The menorah branches form three half-circles which correspond to the three concentric rows of triangles. Thus the decorations on the two visible sides of the block form a harmonious whole. As for the paleography of the Jewish inscription, its salient features, notably the P with a small loop, would easily allow for a fifth-century date which falls within the chronological range proposed by Pralong for the decorative circle; independently, Fine and Rutgers date the

9 References to the editions of Michael III's inscriptions in Pralong, 605-6.

10 Pralong, 606-9.

representation of the menorah from the fourth-sixth centuries (p. 17). It would seem, therefore, that a small column of white Proconnese marble was decorated, simultaneously, with an inscription and a menorah on the front and with a fitting ornament — in which, by the way, we can see no Greek cross — on the right.

The latter observation is crucial for defining the place of the decorated stone in the interior of a synagoge. It could not be integrated in a wall or other solid structure, since it must have been exposed to view from at least two sides. The material it is made of, an expensive Proconnese marble, also suggests that it was part of a prominent decorative construction. A contemporary decoration in marble of the interior of a synagoge in Side, in Pamphylia, offers a general parallel.[11] More specifically, the author of a recent survey of synagogal architecture in the late imperial period points out that 'the Torah shrine which contained the Ark of the Scrolls often took the shape of an aedicula consisting of columns and a lintel'.[12] The Torah ark flanked by two seven-branched menorahs forms a common motif in synagogue mosaic pavements.[13] If so, the decorated marble block from Iznik could be originally a front column of an aedicula. Also the choice of the Biblical verse, often used in benedictions, is appropriate for this position.[14] On this analysis, the marble column would provide the first evidence of the existence of a synagogue in Nicaea under the Later Empire.[15] And in that

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11 B. Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives* (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 7), Paris 1967, 37-38, no. 36, cf. Fine and Rutgers (n. 3), 11-12.

12 R. Hachlili, 'The State of Ancient Synagogue Research', in R. Hachlili ed., *Ancient Synagogues in Israel, Third-Seventh Century C.E.* (BAR International Series 499), Oxford 1989, 1-6, see 2-3 and fig. 14.

13 A. Ovadiah, 'Art of the Ancient Synagogues in Israel', in D. Urman and P.V.M. Flesher (eds.), *Ancient Synagogues. Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery* II, Leiden-New York-Köln 1995, 301-8, see 311-13 (311 for the statement above). The central branch of the menorah is missing in Pralong's drawing (fig. 4b), although its base can be seen on the photograph (fig. 4a).

14 See J. Naveh, *On Sherd and Papyrus. Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from the Second Temple, Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem 1992, 126.

15 It should be added to the list of A.Th. Kraabel, 'The Diaspora Synagogue: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence since Sukenik', in Urman and Flesher (n. 13) I, 95-126 (reprinted from *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II, 19, 1, Berlin-New York 1979, 477-510). Fine and Rutgers (n. 3), 17, consider the idea that the stone comes from a synagogue as the most likely.

case it was a synagogue possibly in decay, and not a church that was scavenged for stones under Michael III for repairing the city walls.

Symmachus, a translator of the Jews

The identity of Symmachus the translator is the subject of a long-standing debate. The recent penetrating study by Alison Salvesen exempts us from surveying it at any length;[16] it should be enough to remind the reader of the main evidence.

According to Eusebius, Symmachus was an Ebionite, a member of a Jewish-Christian heretical sect (*Hist. Eccl.* VI, 17, cf. *Dem. Evang.* VII, 1, 33). By way of contrast, Epiphanius of Salamis indicates that Symmachus was a Samaritan sage who converted to Judaism (*De Mens. et Pond.* 16). Finally, Palladius claims to have seen with his own eyes, in a very old book, a manuscript note by Origen which he quotes as follows: 'I found this book with Juliana the virgin in Caesarea, when I was in hiding in her house. She said that she had received it from Symmachus, the translator of the Jews (τοῦ ἑρμηνέως τῶν Ἰουδαίων), himself' (*Historia Lausiaca* 64).[17] The testimony of Palladius concords with Epiphanius' description, but it cannot be reconciled with that of Eusebius, since the Jews would never have used a Bible translated by an Ebionite.

An attempt has been made, notably by H.J. Schoeps, to discover in Symmachus' translation a theological affinity with the presumed doctrine of the Ebionites; this attempt has been thoroughly refuted by D. Barthélemy who also supported the identification of Symmachus as Sumchos, a disciple of Rabbi Meir.[18] Most recently, Arie van der Kooij and Alison Salvesen argue for the Jewish character of Symmachus' translation of the Bible and show convincingly (after Barthélemy) how his mistaken identification as an Ebionite could have arisen.[19]

Nevertheless, the doubts, or rather a certain confusion, persist. Julio Trebolle Barrera qualifies Symmachus as 'perhaps a Samaritan converted to

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16 A. Salvesen, *Symmachus in the Pentateuch* (Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph 15), Manchester 1991, 283-97.

17 The text is C. Butler, *The Lausiac History of Palladius* II (Texts and Studies VI, 2), Cambridge 1904 (reprint, with vol. I, Hildesheim 1967), 160; translated in Salvesen (n. 16), 285.

18 D. Barthélemy, 'Qui est Symmaque?' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36, 1974, 451-65.

19 See Salvesen (n. 16), in particular 289-90, with reference to A. van der Kooij, 'Symmachus, der vertaler der Joden', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 42, 1988, 1-20 (which I quote after Salvesen).

Judaism, or an Ebionite'. He describes his translation as Jewish, yet suggests that it may have originated with a 'translation made by Ebionites of Cappadocia.'[20] In the recent critical edition of Palladius' *Lausiac History*, only the first phrase of the cited above passage — 'I found this book with Juliana the virgin in Caesarea, when I was in hiding in her house' — is taken to be a quotation from Origen. The second phrase — 'She said that she had received it from Symmachus, the translator of the Jews, himself' — is left out of the quotation marks.[21] Thus the description of Symmachus as the translator of the Jews is denied the authority of Origen (although one no longer understands, with this punctuation, how Juliana's testimony on the provenance of the book could have reached Palladius).

Was then Symmachus or was he not a 'translator of the Jews'? The evidence supplied by the theological contents of his translation suggests an affirmative answer to this question. If, nevertheless, some scholars hesitate to admit it, this is obviously because there are so few data available on the Greek text(s) of the Bible actually in use in the Jewish communities of the later Empire, after the 'expropriation' of the Septuagint by the Christians. Emperor Justinian's famous Novel 146, of 553, allows the Jews to read in synagogues only the Greek translation by Aquila (unless they prefer the Septuagint); is there a place for Symmachus?

The inscription from Nicaea brings a crucial new element to the debate. It produces the first empirical proof of the use of Symmachus' translation of the Bible in a Jewish, arguably synagogal, context. Unless one hypothesizes the existence of an Ebionite community in Nicaea which adorned its prayer-place with a typically Jewish menorah, there can be little doubt left the Symmachus was, indeed, a 'translator of the Jews'.

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20 J. Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible. An Introduction to the History of the Bible*, Leiden 1998, 313.

21 Palladio, *La Storia Lausiaca*, ed. G.J.M. Bartelink, Milan 1974, reprint 1990, 272. Another approach consists in considering only the τοῦ ἑρμηνέως τῶν Ἰουδαίων as Palladius' interpolation, see Salvesen (n. 16), p. 285 (who contests this analysis).