

Calendaric Implications of a Fourth-Century Jewish Inscription from Sicily

Abraham Wasserstein

CIJ 650, recently discussed by Fergus Millar¹ is an inscription on a tombstone from Catania, which a Jew named Aurelius Samohil (Samuel) put up for his wife:

QUAE FATUM COMPLEVIT XII KALENDAS NOVEMBRES DIE
VENERIS LUNA OCTAVA MEROBAUDE ITERUM ET SATURNINO
CONSULIBUS.²

It emerges from the text that Aurelius Samohil was a Jew in Catania who was attached to the religious traditions of his fathers. He used for dating purposes a combination of the Julian calendar with features of Jewish calendar practice. The meaning of some of the data is beyond any doubt: *die Veneris* = Friday; the Roman date given = 21 October; the consular year is that of 383. Sometime in the autumn of 383 the Jewish year 4144 had begun. All this is certain, on the assumption that the data are trustworthy, and there is no reason to doubt that.

The words *octava luna* are taken by Libertini (*apud* Frey, *ad CIJ* 650) to mean “on the eighth day of the (Hebrew lunar) month”; and it is indeed difficult to suggest what else they could mean (but see below). If so, we have a difficulty. In the lunisolar Jewish calendar as fixed since some not certainly known date in late antiquity, possibly in A.D. 359, but perhaps much later, in A.D. 860, it is im-

¹ See my review of Lieu, North and Rajak, in this volume, pp. 173ff.

² I quote here only the part of the inscription relevant to the discussion. In a few cases I have printed the conventional spelling instead of what appears on the stone. But these changes are of no significance and are not to our present purpose.

possible for the 8th day of the month of Marḥeshvan to fall on a Friday.³ The reason for that is that the calendar-makers have taken elaborate precautions to ensure (for purposes that do not concern us here) that the first day of the month of Tishrei does not fall on a Sunday, a Wednesday or a Friday. The month of Tishrei is also, in the fixed calendar, of invariable length: 30 days. It follows that the month following Tishrei, namely Marḥeshvan, cannot begin on a Tuesday, a Friday, or a Sunday. From this again it follows that the eighth day of that month also cannot fall on a Friday; but our stone names Friday as the day of the week coinciding with the other dates given.

A modern computer-generated table⁴ does, in fact, identify 21 October 383 = 8 Marḥeshvan as a Saturday, but with the, for our purposes, important caution that “when comparing Civil and Jewish dates prior to 860, the result is questionable at best.” It is clear that we must prefer the evidence of the contemporary stone to a calculation that is accompanied by that warning; and that means we are still dealing with a date that falls on a Friday.⁵

This is an uncomfortable position to be in. The temptation to try and understand the words *octava luna* in a sense different from that

³ For reasons which are not directly relevant here, 8 Tishrei can never fall so late, and 8 Kislev can never fall so early, in the solar year as 21 October, and therefore the Jewish month in question here can be only Marḥeshvan.

⁴ Joseph Schachter, *Alldate, Comprehensive Datefinder* (Jerusalem 1987).

⁵ It would be idle to speculate that the death took place on Friday *night*, in which case, according to Jewish custom, the next day would have begun; and 8 Marḥeshvan might thus be thought to refer to the Saturday. This would be precisely like what occurs in strictly Jewish documents nowadays in which both the Jewish date and the civil date are mentioned; here there are cases in which comparison of tables might wrongly suggest a mistake in the document, because the civil date refers to one day whereas the Hebrew date refers to the following day, the event, *e.g.*, a marriage ceremony, described and dated having happened after nightfall on the first day. This is common practice; and it may well be true that it was common practice in antiquity. But it would mean that there would then be a discrepancy between the Latin name of the day of the week and the civil date given on the stone. For the civil date — based on the above-mentioned computer-table; and, it must be remembered, it is that table that has “identified” October 21 of the year 383 both with 8 Marḥeshvan and with the Saturday — for the Friday would then be 20 October.

assumed above is seductive but must be resisted. One might wish, *e.g.*, to translate "in the eighth month" since Marḥeshvan, by biblical reckoning, is the eighth, not the second, month of the year. But this, given the date of the stone, is far-fetched and would in any case leave us without a date within the month. It might be suggested that though we have a date from within a fixed calendar, it is one in which the sequence of intercalations is different from that which is now usual: it is, of course, true that in the nineteen-year cycle of the lunisolar calendar there is some, though not much, room for arbitrary variation in the distribution of the seven necessary intercalations over the whole cycle. And indeed it is well known that our present fixed calendar did not at all times and in all places have the precise distribution of the seven intercalations within the year that we now have (3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17, 19). But this too would not help. For, whatever distribution we assume, we could not have an 8 Marḥeshvan date, within that system, falling on a Friday. For we must remember that though the overall purpose of the nineteen-year cycle of the lunisolar calendar (in essence the Metonic cycle) is to ensure that Passover never falls on a date preceding the spring equinox, any Jewish variation of it (and there are a good number of such variations) would have as its main function to ensure the satisfaction of needs that would be frustrated by such an outcome as that which would incidentally issue in 8 Marḥeshvan falling on a Friday. Let me make it quite clear, at the risk of becoming tedious: it is not any particular form of the fixed lunisolar calendar that is offended by such an outcome. Rather, the whole principle of the fixed calendar revolts against it. The Hebrew date given here is not only a misfit in our present fixed calendar. It is incompatible with the assumption that we are dealing with any possible fixed Jewish calendar that is based on the ancient principles of Jewish calendar-making.

It may be the case that we have here evidence that in 383 no generally accepted fixed Jewish calendar existed; this would support the later of the two dates mentioned above which have been suggested as the date of the introduction of the fixed calendar (*i.e.*, 860). In this case, it is not to be thought impossible that local synagogues, while accepting guidance, possibly from as far away as Palestine, for the determination of the major festivals, particularly Rosh Ha-Shanah and Passover, used rather more slapdash methods for counting the days during the rest of the year and determined their

dates by the fairly easy method of lunar observation. This is a method, I may add, that is easier to apply and generally less liable to result in error, as well as being, astronomically, somewhat more exact, at least in the short term, than close adherence to rabbinic calendar rules. This would be an important result.

However, there is another possible answer to our problem. A Jew in a place like Catania in the fourth century may have been so far away from centres of Jewish life that the very idea of a fixed calendar, even if one existed, was not known to him. Now Catania was not at the end of the world. But Frey knows of only one Jewish inscription that comes from there, ours. From the whole of Sicily he has only five more, four from Syracuse (of which at least one [no.653] is from the Byzantine period, and another [no. 651] is undated and does not look to me obviously Jewish) and one from Agrigento (this is marked as questionable by Frey). Ours is thus virtually the only Jewish inscription from Sicily before the Byzantine period that tells us anything significant. What this adds up to I cannot judge. But it seems to me that it cannot be said to mean very much in terms of evidence for Jewish knowledge of specifically Jewish cultural matters, including matters so important for Jewish religious practice as the calendar, except that it poses a problem.

For this problem we have two different explanations. I stress once again that this is indeed an important problem: on the one hand this inscription *may* constitute our only piece of contemporary evidence that the fixed calendar was not introduced and promulgated (at least in the Diaspora) as early as 359. On the other hand, the material in the inscription is clear evidence that, if there existed in 383 a fixed calendar of the type we know, its procedures were not known in a place which, though far away from the Jewish centres, shows evidence of an effort to keep to Jewish calendar norms. These two are not mutually exclusive explanations, and it is this, in fact, that constitutes our real problem here. It means that what *may* be our only piece of contemporary evidence against the promulgation of the fixed calendar in 359 (or at any rate before 383) may actually be no more than an isolated case of ignorance in a faraway corner of the Jewish world.