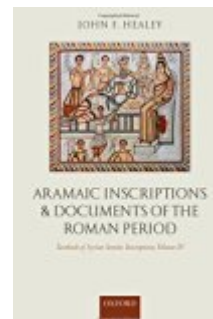


**John F. Healey.** *Aramaic Inscriptions and Documents of the Roman Period.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. XVII, 369 S. \$150.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-925256-5.



**Reviewed by** Peter Alpass

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Healey's volume is presented as a continuation of John Gibson's *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* (TSSI) series, which appeared in three volumes from 1971–1982. He presents here a selection of 80 texts from five dialects of Middle Aramaic: Nabataean, „Jewish (Palestinian)“, Palmyrene, Early Syriac and Hatrene. The collection ranges from the 2nd century BC to the 4th century AD, and so is broadly contemporary to the period of Roman interest in the Near East. Like the earlier volumes of *TSSI*, Healey explains that „there is no intention here to *re-edit*“ (p. V), but rather to provide an introductory volume that is representative of the surviving material. Each text is given a very brief introduction, and the commentary sometimes includes further remarks on items of social, religious or political interest. There follows a bibliography of the text's main publications, which Healey states should always be consulted for full information about the certainty of the reading and translation. After the transliteration and translation there is a commentary. The focus here is explanatory, with a grammatical analysis of nearly every word, rather than

on the variant readings and translations. A lexical index, arranged by dialect, completes the volume.

Healey begins with two introductory chapters. The first sets the texts in their historical and cultural context, and begins with brief summaries of the histories of Nabataea, Judaea, Palmyra, Edessa and Hatra. This is followed by equally brief sections on some common social and cultural issues on which the texts can shed light: literacy and bilingualism, ethnicity, law and religious syncretism. The second deals with linguistic matters. Firstly there is an overview of the different scripts, complete with a chart illustrating the different dialects in their cursive and monumental forms. A discussion of the language follows. This begins with an overview of the different phases of Aramaic, following Fitzmyer's categorisation into Old, Official, Middle and Late. Joseph Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramaean*, Montana 1979, p. 57–84. There is then a more detailed linguistic examination of the different dialects, and an attempt to draw out their salient or distinctive features. This is illustrated by a chart (p. 51). Healey is careful to caution as to the introductory nature of his analy-

sis throughout these chapters, noting that there are complications and exceptions to the features he proposes, and the reader is given ample bibliographies to investigate the different dialects further.

The following chapter has the Nabataean inscriptions and texts. The collection is organised by region, beginning with the texts from Petra and ending with those from the Hauran. The full chronological spectrum is also covered, with Healey including the earliest known Nabataean text (from Elusa, 2nd century BC) and the latest (from Hegra, AD 356). He rightly emphasises the diversity in the language and scripts that have traditionally been grouped in the 'Nabataean' corpus (p. 28), and the wide range of texts he includes highlights this. Healey covers the different categories of inscriptions, including examples of tomb texts, honorifics, building inscriptions and dedications. Two legal texts on papyrus from Nahal Hever represent the very limited surviving number of written Nabataean documents. The selection of Jewish (Palestinian) Aramaic texts begins with two letters of Simon Bar Kosibah delivering his orders during the Second Jewish Revolt (AD 132–135). There follows a papyrus detailing the sale of part of a house, also probably from Nahal Hever. Healey has chosen not to include any examples of Jewish literary texts here. These are abundant, but cannot readily be used as comparative material for the other dialects. The section is therefore finished with some examples of the relatively limited surviving epigraphic material: a synagogue building inscription and examples of tomb inscriptions and dipinti.

The Palmyrene inscriptions are organised by subject matter: firstly a selection of honorific texts, including a pair of statue dedications from the Grand Colonnade honouring King Odainath and Queen Zenobia (AD 271), secondly the famous bilingual Palmyra tariff text, which details the taxes on goods going in and out of the city, thirdly a selection of religious dedications from three of

Palmyra's many temples, and finally three tomb texts. The Early Syriac section contains texts mainly from a funerary context, including a number of mosaic inscriptions from the late 2nd and 3rd century AD. There are also two 3rd century legal parchments, one recording the transfer of a debt and the other the sale of a slave. Texts and translations of these had appeared in Drijvers and Healey's *Old Syriac Inscriptions* (1999), but here they are also accompanied by a commentary. The Hatrene inscriptions are also organised by subject matter. A number of religious texts from Hatra's large central sanctuary area are followed by a selection of statue dedications, some mentioning the royal family. The last five texts are a selection of the legal inscriptions concerning Hatra's temples. These specify punishments, for example for those caught stealing from the temple or temple slaves deserting their posts.

The immediate points of comparison for Healey are the earlier volumes of *TSSI*. There have been some changes in presentation. The practice of transliterating the different Aramaic dialects solely into the Hebrew square script has been abandoned, in line with current practice. This is appropriate to the introductory nature of the volume and allows the Aramaic to be more accessible to readers who may not be familiar with Hebrew. Healey is able to include 21 figures and plates of both inscribed and written material which help to illustrate his discussions of the various scripts. He omits, however, any kind of epigraphic concordance, which would have been helpful considering that most of the texts are also found in a handful of corpora treating the individual dialects.

*TSSI* received a mixed reception, partly because Gibson occasionally proposes unsupported translations without sufficient justification, and was sometimes compared unfavourably with Donner and Röllig's then recent *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*. See, for example, the review of *TSSI I* by Joseph Fitzmyer, in: *Journal of*

Biblical Literature 91 (1972), pp. 109–110 and 112. Healey is careful to note that he does not provide full information on the text, but only acknowledges the most significant doubts in readings (p. V). There are therefore numerous variant translations, readings and interpretations that are omitted. We could note as an example Nehmé's recent discussion of the term ,tr' in Nabataean texts, which appears several times in the Nabataean section and has particular relevance for the discussion of the divine name *dwtr'* in text 4. Laïla Nehmé, *Inscriptions nabatéennes vues et revues à Medain Salih*, in: *Arabia 3* (2005–2006), pp. 179–226, here pp. 214–216. Specialists may find such information has not been included elsewhere. These are not the standards, however, by which this volume should be judged. Healey is generally careful to follow the most favoured readings and translations, and so largely produces an accurate reflection of the scholarly consensus.

There are two small choices in presentation which are less successful. Firstly, although the lines of each text are numbered, the commentaries do not feature the line numbers prominently or consistently enough. This can make the process of locating a particular word in the commentary more cumbersome than it need be. Secondly, the treatment of bilingual Greek/Aramaic texts is not consistent. Healey states that he does not intend to discuss the Greek in detail, and that it is „only translated separately if it is very brief or if it adds significantly to the Aramaic“ (p. VIII). In fact, the Greek is nearly always translated, mostly in a separate section but sometimes contiguously with the Aramaic. Only in the lengthy tax law of Palmyra (no. 37) the Greek text has no translation. Unfortunately this includes the only part of the Greek that does not have an Aramaic parallel (a section on sureties), so we do not have a full English version of the inscription.

However, these are relatively minor matters, and they do not detract greatly from what is a valuable volume. It will be well received by stu-

dents not only with an interest in these Middle Aramaic dialects, but also in the history and culture of those centres where they were used. By bringing together a representative collection of these dialects, and cross-referencing amply throughout, Healey highlights the many cultural similarities between the societies that produced them, as well as some of their more distinctive features. It therefore serves as a useful introduction and overview of these local cultures that flourished on the eastern fringe of the Roman Empire in the first centuries AD.

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