

The Four-Line Greek Inscription from Talpiyot Tomb B: A Summary of Options for Reading and Interpreting It

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In the tomb that is now absurdly being called ‘the Resurrection Tomb’ (in the Discovery documentary of that name), there are two especially interesting features of the ossuaries. One is the design that James Tabor and Simcha Jacobovici claim depicts Jonah being vomited by the big fish, the other is a four line Greek inscription. Both have been extensively discussed by scholars in articles posted on the ASOR Blog (<http://asorblog.org>) and in numerous comments on these articles. The ‘big fish’ image has attracted the widest interest. The issues and options in this case have become very clear. But the discussions of the four-line Greek inscription have been complex and lengthy. They have involved both the readings of the letters and the translation and interpretation of the resulting text. There may well be readers of the ASOR Blog and others who have not had the time or inclination to follow the discussions in detail and would appreciate a summary of the options that have emerged. This is the purpose of this short article, which does not rehearse the arguments in any detail but aims merely to outline the options and issues that have emerged. It may also help to clarify the issues that need investigation if the discussion is to make any further progress.

The main players have been Chris Rollston, James Tabor, Greg Snyder and myself, though there have been other contributors to the discussions through Comments posted in connexion with the major articles. James Tabor had previously set out his own views in his ‘A Preliminary Report of a Robotic Camera Exploration of a Sealed 1st Century Tomb ion East Talpiot, Jerusalem’ (<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/tab368028.shtml>) But he also participated extensively in the discussions on the ASOR Blog through Comments.

The photographs of the inscription on which the discussion is based can be found at <http://thejesusdiscovery.org/press-kit-photos/?wppa-album=6&wppa-cover=0&wppa-occur=1>

There are 13 (plus 4 negatives) but only a few of these were seen by the participants in the discussion before a very late stage. Rollston’s and Snyder’s articles contain the photos they discuss.

I will set out first the various readings of the inscription that have been proposed and then the various translations that have been offered on the basis of these readings. At least twelve different translations have been proposed.

READINGS OF THE INSCRIPTION

While most of the fourteen Greek letters are clear, two have been disputed. Four readings of the whole inscription have been proposed (I add the fifth for the sake of completeness).

(1) Tabor-Bauckham-Snyder	ΔΙΟΣ ΙΑΙΟ ΥΨΩ ΑΓΒ
(2) Rollston 1	ΔΕΟΣ ΤΑΕΟ ΥΨΩ ΑΓΒ
(3) Rollston 2 (Hull)	ΔΙΟΣ ΤΑΕΟ ΥΨΩ ΑΓΒ
(4) Bauckham 2	ΔΙΟΣ ΤΑΙΟ ΥΨΩ ΑΓΒ
(5) [Bauckham ?]	ΔΥΟΣ ΤΑΙΟ ΥΨΩ ΑΓΒ

In dispute

Line 2 letter 1: Until recently Tabor, Bauckham and Snyder all read this letter as an iota and the whole line as a version of the divine Name (Tetragrammaton). Rollston argued (a) that iota was not written this way, and (b) that what Tabor, Bauckham and Snyder took to be a horizontal 'bottom line' of the iota is an irregular scratch. To (a) Bauckham initially responded that it is an iota with serifs, suggesting that the special form of this iota (different from the others in the inscription) served to mark out the beginning of the divine Name. Tabor and Snyder still take this view. Bauckham, from a fresh examination of the photos, thinks the letter is probably a tau.

Line 1 letter 2: Rollston at first read this as an epsilon, but subsequently (following a suggestion by Robert Hull) allowed that it could be an iota. I think that a case might also be made for reading an upsilon (see photo 12), and so I have added here reading (5), though I am not proposing this reading.

Line 2 letter 3: Rollston reads this as epsilon. Snyder's ASOR Blog article is dubious about this, saying that the epsilon is not impossible, but not clear either, and that any reading based on it must be tentative. Tabor and Bauckham are not convinced this is an epsilon.

TRANSLATIONS OF THE INSCRIPTION

(1) Bauckham's ASOR Blog article offered two possible translations of lines 1-2 (of which he then preferred the first, having previously suggested the second):

Belonging to Zeus ΙΑΙΟ
O glorious ΙΑΙΟ

(In the first case ΔΙΟΣ would be the genitive case of Zeus, and the formula correspond to one found on sacred objects said to belong to the god Zeus. In the second case ΔΙΟΣ would be the adjective, frequent in Homer.)

Bauckham also offered two possible translations of lines 3-4 (of which he preferred the first):

I, Hagab, exalt (you/him)
I exalt you, exalt me (I pray)!

(In the first case the letters ΑΓΒ are taken to be a Greek representation of the Hebrew name Hagab. In the second case they are also taken to be transliterated Hebrew, but the Hebrew is understood to be *hagbēh*, 'Raise up!' (hiphil imperative, 2 m s, of *gbh*).

These produce the following possible translations of the whole text:

- (A) Belonging to Zeus IAIO. I, Hagab, exalt (you/him)
- (B) O glorious IAIO, I, Hagab, exalt you
- (C) O glorious IAIO, I exalt you. Exalt me! (i.e. raise me from death)

Bauckham's article offered a full rationale especially for (A), including taking account of the inscription's central position in the design on the ossuary.

Tabor is in favour of (C) or something like it, with lines 3 and 4 using synonymous Greek and Hebrew words, and prefers to see line 3 as an abbreviation (by suspension), so that both lines call on God to raise up the speaker from death.

Snyder is working on the idea that the text is a magical incantation, beginning with an invocation to Zeus-IAIO, but he has not yet offered a full translation.

(2) Rollston divided the words thus

ΔΕ ΟΣΤΑΕ ΟΥ ΨΩ ΑΓΒ

and offered these possible translations:

- (D) Here are bones: I touch (them) not, O Agabus.
- (E) Here are bones: I, Agabus, touch (them) not.
- (F) Here are bones: May I not touch (them), O Agabus.
- (G) Here are bones: May I, Agabus, touch (them) not.
- (H) Here are (my) bones. I, Agabus, crumble not away.
- (I) Here are the bones. I lift (i.e. remove)(them) not, O Agabus.

In all these cases Rollston took ΔΕ to be short version of words like ωδε and ενθαδε, used in Greek burial inscriptions. The verb ψαω (contracted ψω) means (used intransitively) 'to crumble away,' 'to disappear', and has lexical overlap with ψαυω, which means 'to touch'. The plural of οστεον is often contracted to οστα, and Rollston argues that the additional ε can be understood as a dialectal or orthographic variant or as a simple misspelling of οσταεα. Rollston suggested translation (I) in the discussion of his article

(3) In the discussion of Rollston's article he approved a suggestion by Robert Hull to read ΔΙ ΟΣΤΑΕ ΟΥ ΨΩ ΑΓΒ, with ΔΙ being the form δια takes before a vowel. Hull translated:

(J) On account of (the) bones, I, Agabus, do not touch.'

Bauckham offered an alternative translation:

(K) Because of (these) bones, I, Hagab, am not crumbling away (disappearing).

(4) Bauckham offered one attempt to make sense of this reading of the inscription: ΔΙ ΟΣΤΑ ΙΟΥ ΨΩ ΑΓΒ, translated

(L) On account of (the) bones, alas, I, Hagab, am crumbling away.

But he comments that this does not really make sense.

(5) For this reading I can suggest only:

ΔΥ(Ο) ΟΣΤΑ ΙΟΥ ΨΩ ΑΓΒ, translated

(M) Two bones! Alas, I, Hagab, am disappearing!

This is not a serious suggestion.

Issues in dispute

Apart from the differences over reading the letters, the following issues have been discussed:

- (a) Rollston has argued that a declaration (or wish) about 'not touching bones' is intelligible in a Jewish burial context. Bauckham has argued that concerns about corpse impurity cannot in fact explain such a declaration. They have also discussed a passage in Semahot about a social taboo on touching one's father's bones, which Bauckham has argued is unlikely to apply to this case.
- (b) An objection to some of the possible renderings could be that an inscription on an ossuary is unlikely to give the name of the writer while not giving the name of the deceased.

I would also add that we need to know more than LSJ provide about the usage of the verbs ψαω and ψαυω. A TLG search ought to be done by someone who has the time.

Finally, perhaps it is salutary to recall that there are some ossuary inscriptions in Rahmani and CIIP which have never been satisfactorily deciphered!

Bibliography of the articles published on the ASOR Blog

Christopher A. Rollston, *Reflections of an Epigrapher on Talpiyot Tonbs A and B: A Detailed Response to the Claims of Professor James Tabor and Filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici*
28 February 2012

Richard Bauckham, *The Four-Line Ossuary Inscription from Talpiyot Tomb B – An Interpretation*
8 March 2012

Christopher A. Rollston, *The Four-Line Ossuary Inscription from a Talpiyot Tomb: Epigraphic Notes and Historical Discussions*
15 March 2012

H. Gregory Snyder, *A Response to Chris Rollston's Reading of the Ossuary from Talpiot Tomb B*
20 March 2012