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ONLINE PUBLICATIONS: BOOK REVIEW

Field O: The "Synagogue" Site

By Marylinda Govaars, Marie Spiro, and L. Michael White (The Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima Excavation Report 9). Pp. xviii + 287, figs. 115, tables 6, plans 17, map 1. American Schools of Oriental Research, Boston 2009. $84.95. ISBN 978-0-89757-077-0 (cloth).

After meeting with Octavian on Rhodes following the Battle of Actium, Herod the Great rebuilt the town of Straton's Tower on the coast of Palestine, renaming it Caesarea and creating an impressive artificial harbor. Caesarea increased in size and importance during the following centuries; it finally was destroyed by the Egyptian sultan Baybars in 1291 and subsequently abandoned. Various expeditions (Israeli, American, and Italian) working under different auspices have conducted archaeological excavations around Caesarea, on land and under water.

This volume focuses on one area called "O" by the Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima (JECM), which conducted excavations at the site in the 1970s and 1980s under the direction of Robert Bull, Olin Storvick, and Edgar Krentz. Field O is located on the coast to the north of the crusader fortifications but within the Herodian city wall. Despite the series name, this volume is not exactly an excavation report, as Govaars acknowledges (75). Rather, it is mostly a survey and reevaluation of work conducted by earlier expeditions, supplemented by previously unpublished photographs, plans, and sketches. The volume is a product of the efforts of Govaars, who cleaned and surveyed the (previously excavated) area in 1982 within the framework of her master's thesis research and also conducted a small excavation nearby in 1984. Spiro contributes a chapter on the mosaics, and White publishes (or republishes) the inscriptions.

Although presumably there were a number of ancient synagogues at Caesarea, to date, archaeological evidence has been discovered only in the vicinity of Field O (Avi-Yonah's area A). Prior to Govaars' work, various remains had come to light in this area, beginning with the chance find of a Corinthian capital decorated with a seven-branched menorah in 1930. In 1956 and 1962, Michael Avi-Yonah of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem conducted large-scale excavations, but no final report has been published. Avi-Yonah's entry on the Caesarea synagogue in the *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*. Vol. 1 (E. Stern, ed. [New York 1993]) describes five strata, with a possible Early Roman house-synagogue in stratum II and synagogue buildings in strata IV and V. According to Avi-Yonah, the stratum IV synagogue was oriented southward with an entrance in the east wall (toward the town) and was paved with mosaic floors. Associated with this synagogue were fragments of a plaque inscribed in Hebrew listing the priestly courses and oil lamps decorated with menorahs. A hoard of 3,700 bronze coins, almost all of them from the time of Constantius II, was discovered near a wall. Avi-Yonah assumed that the hoard was buried and the synagogue destroyed ca. 355 C.E. He dated the construction of the stratum V synagogue, which was oriented on a north–south axis, to the mid fourth century. Inscriptions were found throughout the building, including in the mosaic floors and on architectural pieces.

From Avi-Yonah's descriptions there seems little doubt that he found one or more superimposed synagogue buildings in area A. The evidence includes the priestly courses inscription, three or more capitals decorated with menorahs, fragments of a chancel screen decorated with a *lulav* and *ethrog* (cultic items associated with the Feast of Tabernacles), and dedicatory inscriptions. However, the information collected and presented by Govaars

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highlights the problems surrounding the dating and interpretation of these remains, hence the qualified reference to a "synagogue." For example, the fragments of the chancel screen and the plaque listing the priestly courses were discovered not in Avi-Yonah's area A but in other areas more than 70 m away.

Govaars does a good job of pinpointing the probable location of the mosaic floors with inscriptions, only one of which (the Isaiah inscription) was still in situ in the 1980s (the Beryllos inscription is in the local kibbutz museum and the others are lost). However, none of the inscriptions (all of which are in Greek) is unambiguously Jewish; such an assumption is based on the supposed presence of one or more synagogue buildings in this area. For example, one inscription commemorating the donation (of a mosaic?) includes a quote from Isaiah (40:31) based on the Septuagint translation, which would be unusual (although not impossible) in a Late Antique Jewish context (to be fair, Avi-Yonah did not associate this inscription with the synagogue). Another inscription that commemorates a gift to the congregation (*laos*) by Marouthas opens with "the Lord is our Helper" (*kyrios boethos*), a phrase that was used by both Christians and Jews. Even an inscription commemorating the dedication of a triclinium mosaic by Beryllos, the *archisynagogus* (head of the synagogue), is problematic, as only "archi" can be read clearly, whereas the sigma is damaged and the upsilon is questionable (the rest of the assumed title was not in the original inscription). As Govaars notes, even if these inscriptions were dedicated by Jews, nothing in them identifies the associated building(s) as synagogue(s).

Much of the data from Avi-Yonah's excavations was unavailable to Govaars or appears to be lost. For example, in most cases the elevations of the various floors uncovered (including the mosaics) are unknown, which means that it is impossible to determine their relationship to one another and the surrounding buildings. The only new (unpublished) information about Avi-Yonah's excavations that Govaars obtained from the Hebrew University was an unfinished site plan by the architect Immanuel Dunayevsky. But this plan does not include the locations of all the mosaic inscriptions nor the findspot of the coin hoard. Govaars presents no other unpublished material from Avi-Yonah's excavations—no pottery, glass, coins, or small finds. In the end, Govaars tentatively identifies the stratum V structure (with the Beryllos inscription) as a late fifth- or early sixth-century synagogue. The identification of the stratum IV and VI buildings, which Govaars dates to the late fourth century and the late sixth to early seventh centuries, respectively, is even less certain (her dating is based mainly on the analyses of Spiro and White). As Govaars concludes, "We cannot unequivocally identify it as a synagogue at any level" (142). Apparently, there was a synagogue, but whether it was one of the buildings uncovered in Avi-Yonah's area A or was located somewhere else in the vicinity remains uncertain.

Although Govaars has done an admirably thorough job of collecting all available documentation, this is a difficult and confusing volume to read. Govaars' decision to present the material in order of discovery (including the chronological discovery of various records) means that there is much repetition of information. It might have been preferable to present an overview of each stratum (based on her findings) with the relevant documentation. And it is regrettable that on the key site plan (64 [fig. 69]), the locus numbers are so small that a magnifying glass is needed to read them. This criticism notwithstanding, Govaars has made a valuable contribution by clarifying what we know and—no less importantly—what we do not know about the Caesarea synagogue.

Jodi Magness

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL
CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA 27599-3225
MAGNESS@EMAIL.UNC.EDU