

## A New Interpretation of the Greek Ossuary Inscription in Talpiyot Tomb B

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I last wrote about this inscription in an essay posted on Larry Hurtado's blog: "The Four-Line Greek Inscription from Talpiyot Tomb B: A Summary of Options for Reading and Interpreting It" (April 2012) (<http://larryhurtado.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/bauckham-talpiyot-tomb-inscription.pdf>).

There I retracted my earlier attempt to interpret the inscription because it depended on reading the first letter of line 2 as an iota, and, after studying the photos more carefully, I had become convinced that it is a tau, as Christopher Rollston had maintained. (The photos are available at <http://thejesusdiscovery.org/press-kit-photos/?wppa-album=6&wppa-cover=0&wppa-occur=1>). However, I was not convinced by Rollston's suggested translations of the text, and found myself unable to make satisfactory sense of it. Since then I have puzzled over it occasionally without making any further progress, but I now have a fresh interpretation to offer.

I propose to read the inscription thus:

ΔΥ<sup>ο</sup>Σ  
ΤΑΙΟ  
ΥΨΩ  
ΑΓΒ

The third letter of line 1 is anomalous: a small circle, about half the size of the other letters, placed as I have represented it. It can hardly be a correction made after the inscription had been completed, because that would require that the inscriber had left an unnecessarily large gap between the Υ and the Σ. Perhaps for some reason it was already there when he started and so he inscribed his letters around it. Or, having written Υ, did he wonder whether it should have been Ο and added a small Ο as a correction?

In my interpretation of the inscription I have in mind two aspects of ossuary inscriptions: (1) the vast majority consist only of names; (2) they sometimes employ unconventional spellings, no doubt because they were composed by family members rather than professionals.

I suggest that the inscription consists of two names: Δυ<sup>ο</sup>σταιου Ψωαγβ.

The first name is a version of Δοσίθεος (sometimes spelt Δωσίθεος), a Greek name that was popular with Jews because it is a theophoric name meaning much the same as Hebrew names like Jonathan and Mattithiah. Tal Ilan's *Lexicon*, Part 1, records 27 instances of Palestinian Jews with this name in the period 330 BCE – 200 CE.<sup>1</sup> These include several versions in Hebrew/Aramaic letters, including

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<sup>1</sup> Tal Ilan, *Lexicon*, Part 1, 273-274, 450. I omit fictional persons, Samaritans and Jews born in the diaspora.

the full transliteration  $\text{דוסטת}$  and an Aramaic short form  $\text{דוסתאי}$  (used in the Mishna for persons who lived in the late Second Temple period). This follows a standard form of apocopation (cf., e.g., Mattai) and was presumably pronounced Dōstai. Our inscription uses this form of the name but with declinable Greek endings, in this case the genitive. The inscriber has vocalized the Aramaic initially as Dūstai, but then perhaps thought better of it and corrected to Dōstai.

The secondary hellenization of an Aramaic name derived originally from the Greek might seem strange, but there are parallel cases. The best known is Thaddaeus, well known from Matthew's and Mark's lists of the Twelve. This derives from another of the Greek theophoric names with meanings much the same as Dositheos. The Greek original might be Theodotus or Theodorus or Theodosius. The Greek name was given the Aramaic short form  $\text{תדאי}$ , pronounced Taddai. This was then given a declinable Greek form  $\Thetaαδδαῖος$  (as in Mark and Matthew, but attested also in papyri).

$\Delta\upsilon(\omicron)\sigma\tauαιου$  in our inscription is genitive to indicate that the bones in the ossuary belong to this man  $\Delta\upsilon(\omicron)\sigma\tauαιος$ . The simple Greek genitive is used in this way on other ossuaries.

Construing the rest of the inscription as a name is less straightforward. A name beginning with  $\Psi$  is likely to be Egyptian. It is easy to interpret just the two letters  $\Psi\omega$  as an Egyptian name. There is a name  $p\bar{s}-\bar{s}w$ ,<sup>2</sup> which is attested in Greek as  $\Psi\bar{\omega}$ <sup>3</sup> or  $\Psi\bar{\omega}\zeta$ <sup>4</sup> or  $\Psi\bar{\omega}\iota\zeta$ .<sup>5</sup> The name means 'The [god] Shu' ( $p\bar{s}$  is the article). If the last line of our inscription ( $\alpha\gamma\beta$ ) is part of the same name, then it is a theophoric name incorporating the name of the god Shu. I have not found a plausible such name in the reference works.<sup>6</sup> I rather hope someone reads this who knows ancient Egyptian and can help! (That would really prove the value of posting material like this online.) I wonder whether the name is a combination of the names of the two gods Shu and Geb (though the latter seems usually in Greek versions of names to appear as  $\kappa\eta\beta$  or  $\kappa\omicron\iota\beta$ ). Shu (the air) was the father of Geb (the earth).

There was, of course, a large Jewish community in Egypt and Egyptian names were commonly used by Jews.

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<sup>2</sup> Erich Lüddeckens, *Demotisches Namenbuch*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1981) 511, cf. 215 and vol. 1/18 (Index volume) 152:  $p\bar{s}-s\bar{w}$  and  $p\bar{s}-s'\bar{w}$ .

<sup>3</sup> Daniele Foraboschi, *Onomasticon Alterum Papyrologicum: Supplemento al Namenbuch di F Preisigke* (Testi e Documenti per lo Studio dell' Antichità 16; Milan: Cisalpino, 1971) 350, 353

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Preisigke, *Namenbuch* (Heidelberg: self-published by author, 1922) col. 495; Lüddeckens, *Demotisches Namenbuch*, 511.

<sup>5</sup> Preisigke, *Namenbuch*, col. 495; Foraboschi, *Onomasticon*, 350.

<sup>6</sup> The only compound name beginning  $p\bar{s}-\bar{s}w$  that I have found is  $p\bar{s}-\bar{s}w-t\bar{s}j=f-n\bar{h}t.t$ , meaning 'The [god] Shu is his strength' (Lüddeckens, *Demotisches Namenbuch*, 220). But in Greek forms there are  $\Psi\omega\sigma\alpha\tau\mu\epsilon\upsilon\varsigma$ ,  $\Psi\omega\sigma\alpha\tau\mu\eta\varsigma$  and  $\Psi\omega\sigma\alpha\upsilon\varsigma$  (Preisigke, *Namenbuch*, col. 495).

If the inscription does consist of two names then they may both belong to the same man. The second name has no Greek ending, perhaps just because the inscriber is squeezing the name into the remaining space, which may also account for the lack of a vowel between the  $\gamma$  and the  $\beta$ .

If reading  $\Psi\omega\alpha\gamma\beta$  as a single name does not prove plausible, then we could read the name  $\Psi\tilde{\omega}$  in line 3 and take the letters  $\alpha\gamma\beta$  in line 4 to be a third name, the Hebrew name Hagab (Greek  $\text{Ἁγαβος}$ ), as I proposed in my original interpretation of the inscription (<http://asorblog.org/?p=1848>). In that case, I do not think all three names could plausibly belong to one person, and we should need to suppose that the bones of three men were all put in the ossuary at the same time and all three of their names inscribed.