

Philip F. Esler

Babatha's Orchard: The Yadin Papyri and an Ancient Jewish Family Tale Retold.

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In this volume, Philip Esler, a renowned scholar in the field of New Testament studies, leads us into a realm that has rarely been explored to this day—that of the ancient Nabataean documentary papyri discovered in the Cave of Letters at Naḥal Ḥever, a wadi on the western shore of the Dead Sea. These documents were found in a bundle of papyri once belonging to Babatha bat Šim'on, a landowner from Maḥoza who, during the turmoils of the Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans (132–135 CE), sought refuge in the cave; she may also have died there, or at least had to flee without being able to recover the documents, which remained in the shelter for about two millennia. In her purse, Babatha had carefully stored 36 documents, mostly legal, dating from 94 to 132 CE: 27 in Greek, three in Aramaic, and six in Nabataean. The first four of the Nabataean documents (P. Yadin 1–4), which are also the most ancient in the archive, form the subject of Esler's investigation—the first study of such length ever undertaken on these documents, which received their *editio princeps* only in 2002, while the Greek papyri had already been published in their entirety in 1989.

The chronological gap between the two publications—partially justified by the fact that the Nabataean texts were typologically quite novel, and substantially more complex than the Greek documents—meant that, in the past decades, studies on the Greek texts flourished, yielding many valuable insights into the domains of Roman and Jewish history, languages, linguistics and law; on the contrary, the Nabataean and (to a lesser extent) Aramaic documents received relatively scarce attention, with the exception of the so-called 'Papyrus Starcky' and Babatha's *ketubbah*. Despite a few studies devoted to certain aspects of the language, script and socioeconomic climate, an overall discussion of the Nabataean texts long remained a desideratum; precisely for this reason, Esler's book must be considered a highly welcome gift, just as Michael Wise's recent reevaluation of the general contents and prosopography of the Judaean Desert archives (M.O. Wise, *Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea: A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents*, Yale University Press, New Haven—London, 2015).

It must be said, editorial misadventures aside, that it is not completely without reason that the Nabataean documents from the Cave of Letters remained at the margins of Babatha archive studies for so long. Within that bundle of documents, they always seemed to form a separate unit, and their relationship with the Greek and Aramaic papyri was not completely clear. As a matter of fact, with the exception of P. Yadin 6 and 9 (dated to 119/120 and 122 CE, respectively), all the Nabataean documents date back to the end of the

first century CE, and precisely in the period from 94 to 99 CE, thus predating the establishment of the Provincia Arabia (106 CE)—and well removed from the cultural and legal framework of Babatha's Greek documents. Clearly, these papyri had been in Babatha's hands, as they concerned properties she had inherited from her father, Šim'on. But the overall and internal connections among these deeds remained unclear, at least until Esler's investigation, which starts with a long and in-depth presentation of the documents' environment, history and their social value within the context of 'archival ethnography' (pp. 1–93).

In the second part of the volume, the documents are discussed in six individual chapters. One example that serves to illustrate Esler's methods and the scope of his achievement is his treatment of the most ancient and enigmatic Nabataean document, P. Yadin 1. It is a double deed dated to September 94, written by a professional scribe and concerning an acknowledgement of debt between a certain *mqymw br 'wt'hy* (Muqimu, son of 'Awat-'Ilahi, in Esler's vocalisation) and his wife *'mt'yisy brt kmnw* ('Amat-'Isi, daughter of Kaminu); a third party, *'bd'mnw* ('Abad-'Amanu), acted as guarantor, and four witnesses signed the act. No Jews were involved, and none of the goods mentioned in the text seemed in any way related to any known property of Babatha's family. According to Esler (pp. 105–8 and 141–43), however, P. Yadin 1 can be understood only in connection with the very similar contents of P. Yadin 2 and 3, two deeds of purchase of the date orchard that Babatha's father bought in 99 CE by the Nabataean woman *'by'dn* ('Abi-'adan), according to P. Yadin 3—a property that had previously been sold to another Nabataean man, Archelaus (P. Yadin 2). Esler points out that P. Yadin 1 to 4 were prepared by a family of scribes operating in the same territory, around Maḥoza (Babatha's homeland), and he is able to show a crucial connection between these documents, highlighting that the guarantor of P. Yadin 1 ('Abad-'Amanu) was indeed the father of the aforesaid Archelaus, who had first tried to purchase the date orchard subsequently sold to Babatha's father. According to Esler's reconstruction, 'Abad-'Amanu died unexpectedly; his son Archelaus found himself unable to complete the purchase, and Babatha's father, Šim'on, replaced him in the transaction. In some unknown way, moreover, he also obtained the deed attesting 'Abad-'Amanu's involvement in another transaction, which his son Archelaus suddenly had to satisfy as a consequence of the law of universal succession, a law that Esler believes was in use among the Nabataeans (pp. 143–49).

Another example of the approach Esler applies to this complex topic can be discerned in his commentary on P. Yadin 4, another double deed, whose contents remain uncertain due to its fragmentary preservation. Esler devotes a detailed discussion to this papyrus (pp. 176–220); based on his examination of

the surviving fragments, he offers an emended, annotated edition of the text (Appendix 1, pp. 229–33). Refuting previous interpretations of the document as a deed of sale, purchase of land, guarantee or a guarantor's agreement, Esler concludes that it is actually a grant, closely related to P. Yadin 3; he is moreover able to detect, for the first time, the names of the main parties involved: the grantor, *ḥšmr' l br lty* (Ḥaşmar'il, son of Lutay; the first name seems doubtful, but see pp. 157–61), and the grantee, his wife *'by'dn* (the same 'Abi-'adan found in P. Yadin 2 and 3). The result is brilliant, and while some of the readings and connections are more secure than others, it is undeniable that the picture of P. Yadin 4 that emerges is generally sound and consistent. The volume is rounded out by a brand-new annotated translation of P. Yadin 1 to 4, an extensive bibliography and two accurate author and subject/name indexes.

In summary, Esler's study represents true and meaningful progress in our understanding of the long-neglected Nabataean documents from the Babatha archive; this volume confirms that, far from being an already exploited source, the archive still has much to say about the economic, social and cultural history of the apparently marginal territory between southern Judaea and northern Arabia, in a period some decades removed from the Bar Kochba uprising.

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