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On Jacob's Path: Text, Layout, and Orality in a Late Antique Jewish Pilgrim's Temple Mount Graffito

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Abstract
Renovations in 1927–28 on an Islamic school uncovered a little-studied Hebrew graffito carved into the northern wall of Jerusalem's Temple Mount. Engraved by a late antique or early medieval pilgrim named Ya'akov ben Yosef, the inscription offers rare evidence of post-Second Temple Jewish devotional graffiti on this contested sacred site. This study analyzes the graffito using multimodal methods, going beyond its text to study its visual and spatial dimensions in conversation with contemporary graffiti studies. I read features such as its variations in letter size, line breaks, and the visual emphasis of its closing words—*amen, amen, selah*— alongside contemporary scribal conventions and prayer traditions to suggest that the inscription both reflects and invites oral response. Drawing comparisons with synagogue inscriptions, manuscript layouts, and ritual amulets, I argue that Ya'akov's graffito participates in broader late antique practices of inscribing devotion and shaping sacred space through writing. Finally, I read Ya'akov as a Jewish pilgrim to Jerusalem. Graffiti like his reasserted Jewish presence at the Temple Mount, reinscribed Hebrew into Jerusalem's linguistic landscape, and forged a material link between Jewish worshippers across time.

Keywords
Hebrew epigraphy; Temple Mount; Jewish pilgrimage; late antiquity; orality; visual layout; sacred space; graffiti; multimodality

1. Introduction

In 1927–28, renovations at an Islamic school built into the northern wall of Jerusalem's Temple Mount revealed a Hebrew inscription left by a Jewish pilgrim named Ya'akov ben Yosef (Mayer, 1930; Ben-Dov, 1986; *CIIP* 1/2.791). This inscription is not one of the famed late antique Hebrew inscriptions that garners much study. It has scarcely been published on, and epigraphers' usual questions of dating and onomastics remain unclear. Here, I focus on this inscription employing methods from studies of both contemporary graffiti and ancient epigraphy—particularly the use of multimodal approaches that situate ancient inscriptions in their visual, spatial, social, political, and religious contexts (Mandell, 2022; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). After connecting the inscription's visual layout to Jewish scribal practices found in manuscripts (Part 2), I argue that it both reflects and invites oral prayer (Part 3) before situating this inscription in the context of Jewish pilgrimage to Israel during the late antique and early Islamic eras (Part 4). I engage Ya'akov's inscription as a scholar trained in ancient Jewish texts as well as the study of lettering arts, including Hebrew calligraphy both contemporary and medieval (Homrighausen, forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b, forthcoming-d) as well as contemporary graffiti (Homrighausen, forthcoming-c).

Figure 1. Image of squeeze of inscription as found in 1927–28 (from Mayer, 1930). Public domain.

The inscription's reading is largely uncontroversial. I reproduce Yardeni and Price's edition in *CIIP*:

יי אֱלֹהי צבאות	God the Lord of Hosts,
תבני הבית הזה	may you build this house
בחיה יעקב בן	in the lifetime of Ya'akov son of
יוסף ותיפולקטוס	Yosef, and (in the lifetime) of Theophylactus
וסיסיניה ואנסטסיה	and Sisiniya and Anastasia.
אמן ואמן	Amen and Amen,
סלה	Selah. (*CIIP* 1/2.791)

The inscription was first published by Mayer in 1930 after it was discovered during renovations of the building in 1927–28 (Mayer, 1930). It had been hidden because it lies in a private residence. The inscription adorns the Herodian wall of the Temple Mount, on which Al-Is'ardiyya—a madrasa endowed in 1359 CE (760 AH) (Burgoyne, 1987)—was later built. It is located on the northern side of the mount and is inscribed in one of the stones on the south side. Burgoyne, in his survey of Mamluk architecture in Jerusalem, describes the room built around this inscription as a tomb. He writes: "The lower part of the south wall of the recess, distinct from the other walls, is unplastered and the masonry, to judge from its size and tooling, is Herodian and in situ up to a height of about two metres" (Burgoyne, 1987, p. 373). By his time, however, the inscription had "since been effaced" (Burgoyne, 1987, p. 379n18), as seen in Figure 3.

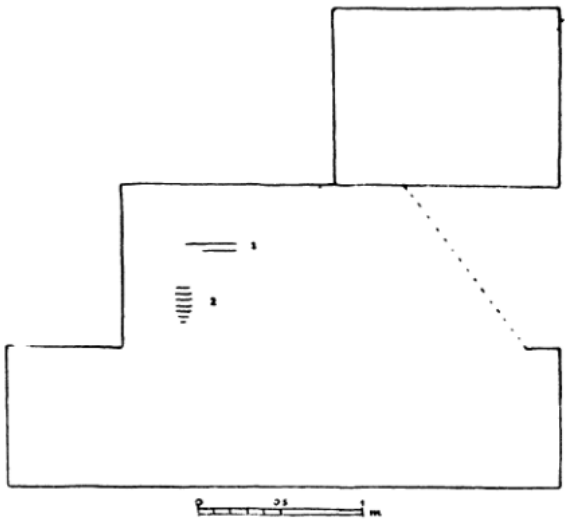

Figure 2. Drawing of wall to scale (from Mayer, 1930). Public domain.

The date of this inscription is unclear. Ben-Dov, Yardeni, and Price suggest it was inscribed in the sixth century or later. It could not have been written after 1359 CE, as explained below. While Mayer suggested that the Greek name implies a Greek Jewish writer, Ben-Dov points out that this does not narrow the geographic context much given the spread of Greek throughout the eastern Mediterranean. While Yardeni and Price attribute it to a skilled hand akin to that of synagogue inscriptions of the time, di Segni describes the hand as "not quite professional" (Di Segni, 2021, p. 39; see also Yardeni, 2002, pp. 66–79). Its letters, for example, are not perfectly ruled to a guideline. They seem instead to be freehand. Ya'akov's inscription appears to have been carved spontaneously, but by a practiced hand.

Plate 33.18 'Pilastered' masonry in south wall of tomb recess

Figure 3. Photo of inscription's wall circa 1970s-80s (from Burgoyne, 1987). Permission requested.

The size of the inscription is unclear. Mayer's original publication gives the dimensions of the stone as 334 x 180 cm, and assuming that his drawing is to scale, it would be roughly 9.71 cm wide and 22.25 cm tall (Figure 2). Figure 3 shows the wall as imaged in Burgoyne's survey in the 1970s and 1980s. Though the inscription was effaced by then, the white rectangle on the wall near the center of the photo seems to be the graffito's site. (It is not clear whether this white is the result of paint or erasing the inscription with an abrasive tool and removing the darker patina on the stone.)1 Using the ladder below for scale, we can again deduce that the inscription was quite small. In his original publication, Mayer indicates that he made a squeeze of the inscription. If this squeeze still exists, it may be in the Mayer papers at Kinneret College or the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem and could yield precise dimensions. However, we do not need exact dimensions to tell that it was small. If the stone was sufficiently soft, it could be the result of one hand carving or scratching into the stone with a metal stylus with gestural marks.

Graffiti provides a useful lens for this inscription. Though 'graffiti' is difficult to define, especially cross-culturally and over time, I take it to refer to unauthorized acts of textual inscription in public spaces (Baird and Taylor, 2010, pp. 3–7; Ross, 2016; Škrabal et al., 2023, pp. 8–13). By 'unauthorized' I do not mean illegal or vandalistic, but merely that does not seem to have been planned by an authority (political or ecclesiastical), and that it seems to be the spontaneous work of one individual. If we view this inscription as graffiti, however, it opens up a useful set of lenses used to study graffiti as a "relationship between a surface, text, image, author and audience" (Baird and Taylor, 2010, p. 6). This framework is used to study contemporary urban graffiti as well (Andron, 2024). Recent studies of ancient graffiti frequently note its role in religious ritual and the shaping of sacred space (Felle and Ward-Perkins, 2021; K. B. Stern, 2018).

Further, my analysis of Ya'akov ben Yosef's inscription draws on the notion of monumentality. As Mandell and Smoak write in their studies of a much earlier corpus of Hebrew inscriptions, monumental inscriptions can be defined not only as those professionally written or sponsored by religious or political elites, but as any inscription that significantly impacts its viewers, its spatial context in the city, and the memories and emotions people attach to both (Smoak, 2017; Smoak & Mandell, 2019). They analyze inscriptions in pre-exilic Jerusalem in terms of multiple modes: "scale, space, spectatorship, graphic design, and materiality" (Smoak & Mandell, 2019, pp. 311–12). Such a framework serves here as well. Rhis inscription's meaning is not just what Ya'akov intended, but also how centuries of viewers and readers may have seen and/or read it. Further, in such multimodal analysis, Kress and van Leeuwen emphasize that each mode is a cultural product specific to a time and place, a semiotic resource on which authors and receivers of communication acts draw (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). We begin with the visual setting of this inscription's textual layout.

2. Visuality and Graphic Design of the Inscription

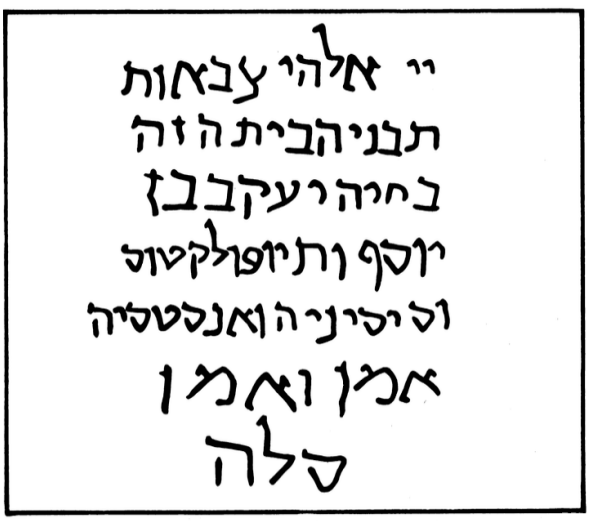

Figure 4. Line drawing of inscription (from Ben-Dov, 1986).

While previous studies of this inscription focus mainly on its words, its visual elements are contribute to its meaning. These include its size, its scribal hand, its

1 - I am indebted to Aren Wilson-Wright for this observation.

variations in word sizing and spacing, and its textual layout. Multimodal analyses of written communication, such as advertisements and novels, stress that layout is a mode of communication. This includes everything from the spacing between lines and letters to the way blocks of text are arranged and spatially located in relation to one another (Stöckl, 2014; Nørgaard, 2018, pp. 119–63; Hill, 2023). In Jewish tradition, examples include the traditional layout of a page of Talmud, which communicates dialogue and tradition at the same time (D. Stern, 2020). Space, as typographer Will Hill has written, functions as a metalanguage that accompanies words and letters (Hill, 2023; cf. Homrighausen, 2022). Indeed, recent studies of epigraphy, mostly Latin and Greek, attend to visual layout as a mode of communication, including variations in word size and layout of words (Amendola et al., 2024; Angliker and Bultrighini, 2023). Roman lettercarvers referred to the act of arranging text on surface as *ordinatio*, and the fact that there is a specific term for this suggests intention (Edmondson, 2014, pp. 117–22). Some of these studies note parallels between conventions of text layout in inscriptions and manuscripts. Ya'akov's inscription must also be situated in this visual world of Hebrew writing across different media.

First, the inscription's size and relatively spontaneous hand suggest a rhetoric of personal communication. This is not a professional epigraph made by an oficial scribe, but a relatively unplanned devotional act made by a writer whose hand the viewer can 'see' and 'touch' through looking at the scrawled letters (cf. Smoak and Mandell, 2019). The size of this inscription also feels personal. We might imagine it as being relatively close to the ground originally, able to be touched and viewed up close.

A look at Ya'akov's lettering suggests that he attended to the visual layout of the text, including both the shape of the text block as a whole and the line breaks. In the third line, the last three letters בבן seem to be written larger to align with the lines above. Conversely, the lengthy non-Hebrew names in lines four and five are written quite small. Although the writer did not plan this inscription to be perfectly left-justified or centered, there is some effort at symmetry. In line six, like line three, the writer appears to enlarge the letters and adjust the letter spacing to stretch the ואמאו to the left margin. After failing to do so, he writes the סלה in the center; he cannot stretch those three letters across the entire inscription, so he chooses a different visual pattern. Whether by design or not, the enlarged "*amen*, *amen*, *selah*," the fact that these words are divided by line breaks, and the greater letter spacing in the second amen, combine to visually emphasize these words.

Late antique Jewish sources, luckily, supply parallel examples of visual modes of Hebrew writing. We find many traditions of looking at letterforms as images, such as a tradition in the Babylonian Talmud:

> The letter *shin* (שׁ) is 'falsehood' (שֶׁקֶר). The letter *tav* (ת) is 'truth' (אֱמֶת). … And why do the letters of 'falsehood' all stand on one leg, and the letters of 'truth' stand on bases that are wide like bricks? Because the truth stands, and falsehood does not stand. (b. Shabb. 104a)

The letters of the word for 'falsehood' all stand on one point on the horizontal baseline of writing, while the letters in the word for 'truth' each stand on two points, two legs. This suggests that truth stands eternal, while falsehood does not. Such rabbinic sources abound with playful interpretations that read letters' shapes as part of their meaning, treating them at times like pictograms (Handelman, 2018; Perani, 2012; Elitzur, 2013; Wollenberg, 2023; Homrighausen, forthcoming-b). The Hebrew Bible itself contains no awareness of these traditions, reinforcing the point that the Hebrew written language's specific visual modes of meaning-making cannot be projected onto the entire history of the language. While space precludes a full study of the topic here, but three manuscript-focused examples from late antique Judaism may suffice to illustrate visual modes of letters and layout—what James Diamond calls the Torah scroll's "adventures in space" (Diamond, 2019, p. 154). While the metalanguage of spacing in manuscripts may not map perfectly onto inscriptions, the former often have more explanations in textual traditions; further study is required.

The first example comes from the use of visual spacing in biblical scribal practices, spacing that delineates semantic divisions and possibly reflects and cues oral performance. Some Qumran Psalms manuscripts contain stichometric arrangements of these poems that use line breaks and extra spacing between phrases to divide the text's sense units (e.g., 4QPsb; see Berkovitz, 2023; Miller, 2019, pp. 116–87). According to Miller, uses of both interlinear and intralinear spacing divide the poems' sense units to facilitate oral recitation. In Masoretic scribal tradition, first attested in the eighth to ninth centuries CE, the entire Hebrew Bible (not just poems) is structured into open passages (*petuhot*) in which a full line break separates one section from the next, and closed passages (*setumot*) in which several spaces separate one section from the next. Generally the former "expresses a stronger break" than the latter: "one could generalize and say that an open passage comes at the beginning of an entirely new subject, and a closed passage indicates a change from one sub-topic to another" (Ofer, 2019, p. 61; see also Korpel et al., 2007). In the system of open and closed passages, visual spacing is used to separate sections of lengthy prose in much the same way that modern printed Bibles add section titles and paragraph breaks (Wendland and Louw, 1993). In both examples, the visual language of spacing reflects semantic chunking of the text. Thus, Ya'akov ben Yosef's inscription may also use space to emphasize and isolate key words such as *selah*.

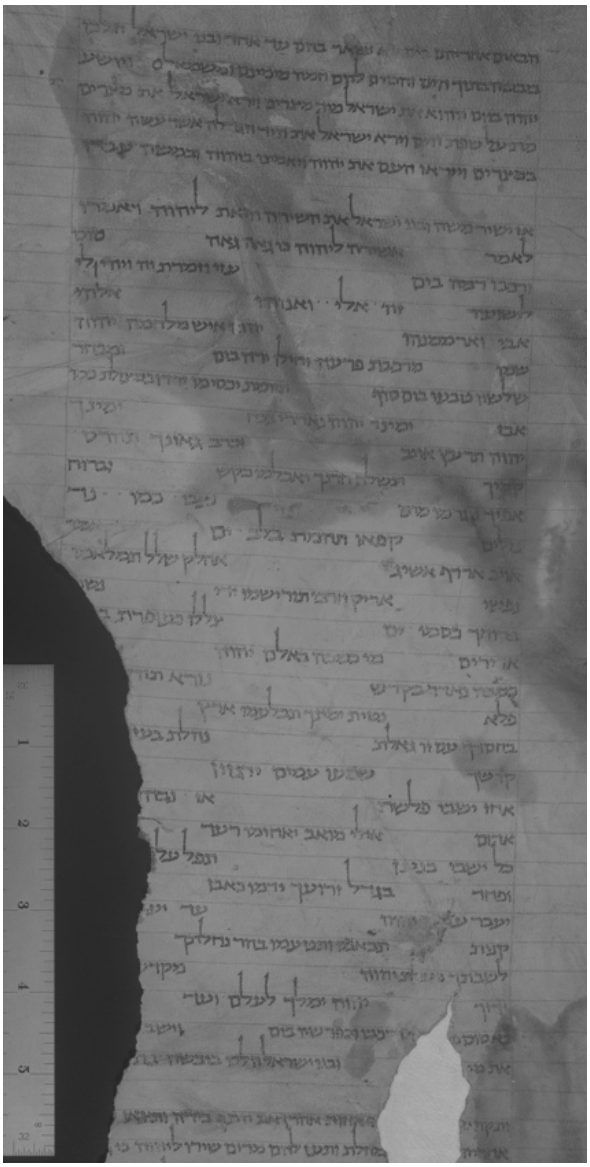

Figure 5. Song of the Sea (Exod. 15) from partial Torah scroll, c. 7th–8th centuries, ink on parchment. Duke University, Ashkar-Gilson, Hebrew MS 2. Permission requested from Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

Other Jewish sources attest to textual layouts being seen as images, as in the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–18), the song sung by the people of Israel in gratitude to God immediately after passing through the Sea of Reeds and escaping slavery in Egypt. Although very few Hebrew-language Bible manuscripts survive from the period between the Dead Sea Scrolls (ending in 70CE) and the early Masoretic codices, one surviving remnant is the seventh-to-eighth-century Ashkar-London manuscript (Sanders, 2014, pp. 4–7), which includes the Song of the Sea (Figure 5). This poem's special layout is explained in rabbinic sources (Homrighausen, forthcoming-b). In a discussion of the visual layout of the sons of Haman (Esth 9:7–9) in the Esther scroll, the Babylonian Talmud indirectly explains the layout of the Song of the Sea:

Rabbi Ḥanina bar Pappa said that Rabbi Sheila, a man of the village of Timarta, expounded: All of the [biblical] songs [שירים, *shirim*] are written in the form of a half-brick [אריח] over a brick [לבינה] and a brick over a half-brick—except for this song [Esth 9:7–9] and the kings of Canaan. (bMeg 16b)

Here, the shape of a column of text is compared to the wall of a building. The Ashkar-London manuscript supplies a suggestion of what "half-brick on brick and brick on half-brick" looked like in rabbinic times. Both Talmuds explain this layout as a reminder that Haman's reign, the antagonist of the Book of Esther, is continually blotted out. The Jerusalem Talmud elaborates that it points to the fact that "any such building [of Haman's] will not stand" (yMeg 3:8). The Babylonian Talmud's explanation is more specifically directed at Haman's sons, who are executed in the biblical text: "so that they should never rise from their downfall" (bMeg 16b). The focus lies here on the secure knowledge of their death, and the hope that Haman and his ilk will never again rise to torment Israel. Visually, the names of the sons of Haman form two tall, narrow columns built of bricks. Their half-brick on half-brick and brick on brick kingdom will easily topple, unlike the sturdy half-brick on brick and brick on half-brick structure of God's kingship proclaimed in the Song of the Sea: "The Lord will reign for ever and ever" (Exod 15:18). The sons' names are surrounded by white space, suggesting they are alone and vulnerable—quite a reversal from earlier in the story when their father reigned supreme!

Though later sources differ on exactly how this song was to be laid out (del Barco, 2017, 2020; Kolodni, 2023), for our purposes, what matters is the fact that the layout is a mode of meaning. What is clear is that the song's visual layout is not just a semantic division, but an image, akin to the *carmina figurata* of Latin poetry or later Hebrew traditions of micrography. The song's special scribal treatment may be linked to to its liturgical and oral emphasis in Jewish communal prayer (e.g. b. Rosh Hash. 31a). This layout would been striking even to those who were illiterate, or those who were literate but did not read Hebrew. Returning to Ya'akov ben Yosef's inscription, we might suggest that his visual layout would have similarly made an impact even to those who could not read it. Its attempt at symmetry suggests order and intention, a carefulness and devotion—though it does not, as far as I can tell, suggest an image of something in particular.

Finally, a tradition from the late first-millennium rabbinic tractate Massekhet Soferim suggests that the relative sizes of words and letters did, for some Jews, indicate semantic emphasis and/or oral performance. This arises in a chapter discussing the writing of the Torah:

Shema Israel [Deut 6:4] must be written at the head of a line [of writing], and all of its letters elongated (ויטושפ), and 'one' (אֶחָד) must be at the end of the line. (Mass. Sop. 9.4, trans. from (Higger, 1937, p. 202))

The text describes two visual modes of emphasis: setting a verse at the top of a column of writing, and making its letters larger. Here, 'elongated' seems to mean that the letters are taller, likely larger overall. I do not know of any extant examples of this practice, but a similar tradition first attested in early Masoretic codices (and still employed today) holds that the *ayin* of shema and the *daled* of echad are written larger (Diamond, 2019, pp. 130–32). The semiotic mode of changing the text size described here likely reflects a ritual and oral emphasis on reciting, writing, reading, and wearing this verse (and the section it begins). Indeed, the *shema* loomed

large in Jewish liturgy's oral prayers, both individual and communal, as it does to this day (Tigay, 1996, pp. 440–42). This verse was worn as an amulet (*tefillin*: Cohn, 2008) and posted on the doorposts of one's house (*mezuzot*: Jansson, 1994; Eshel et al., 2010). Thus, visual layout and larger letters denote emphasis and possible oral expression, an example of visual language that informs our understanding of Ya'akov's inscription. Just as the *shema* is emphasized by being written larger, the *amen*, *amen*, *selah* might have been too.

Each of these examples, while not perfectly analogous to Ya'akov ben Yosef's inscription, suggest that visual thinking about layout and design was a feature in late antique Hebrew writing, even if extant evidence is far more meager than we would like. Indeed, if Jewish traditions of this time held that the Torah was "black fire on white fire," that the space between the letters is just as important as the letters themselves, then we should not be surprised that spacing is important in inscriptions too (Midrash Tanhuma on Gen 1:1). At times, this visual thinking made written texts akin to images. Other times, it could suggest and/or reflect oral performances.

3. Prayer and Orality

As epigrapher John Bodel writes, in many cases, "inscriptions engendered speech" (Bodel, 2012, p. 16). Bodel suggests that acts of writing seem to affect the divine realm, especially in magical incantations, which he describes as performative writing or symbolic epigraphy (Bodel, 2012, pp. 19–24). Writing about ancient Greek dedications, Joseph Day movingly suggests that a dedicatory inscription would "cause viewers to interact with the object in such a way as to produce, in their eyes, their mouths and ears, and their minds, a representation of the original act of dedication" (quoted in Smoak, 2017, p. 332). This lens illuminates Ya'akov's inscription. In the previous section, I showed how the visual modes of layout and size in Ya'akov's inscription emphasize and foreground the final "*amen*, *amen*, *selah*." Many of the examples I adduced, such as the *shema*'s visual layout and the use of stichometry in Qumran Psalms manuscripts, relate visual emphasis to oral performance. Here, I continue that line of thought, arguing that that the emphasized *amen*, *amen*, *selah* at the end invites its viewer-reader to pray this out loud.

The inscription's wording parallels Jewish prayers praying for the city of Jerusalem. Perhaps the most famous of these is the fourteenth blessing of the *Amidah*, the statutory prayers which the rabbinic movement established late in the first century CE—though the exact wording of the prayers is not well-recorded or clear until toward the end of that millennium (Langer, 2003; Instone-Brewer, 2003). The fourteenth blessing, *Boneh Yerushalayim*, prays for the city of Jerusalem to be built again. Although textual variants exist, all versions end with blessing God as "builder of Jerusalem (לשורים בוני)" (Instone-Brewer, 2003, pp. 32–35). The earliest version from the land of Israel seems to imply that the Temple was still standing, but the version attested in the ninth century that came to be standard pleads for God to "build her soon in our days (בנה אותו קרוב בימינו)." This prayer also echoes a prayer found in the Mishnah (Taan. 4:8):

"This is the building of the Temple (בנין בית המקדש). May it be rebuilt (שיבנה) speedily in our days (בימינו), Amen." (Oxford Annotated Mishnah trans.)

The Mishnah prayer, like the later *Amidah* blessing that came to be standard, pleads for God to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. Ya'akov's blessing echoes both. His "may you build this house (תבני הבית הזה)" uses the verbal root בני used for the noun "building" and the verb "may it be rebuilt" in the Mishnah, and for the "builder of Jerusalem" and the "build her soon" in the *Amidah*. Just as both the Mishnaic prayer and the *Amidah* plead to rebuild "in our days," so Ya'akov prayers for the Temple to be rebuilt "in the lifetime (בחיה) of Ya'akov son of Yosef." Finally, early tannaitic sources mandate that the *Amidah* be recited facing the temple (b. Ber. 30a; y. Ber. 4:5; Langer, 2003, pp. 147–48). If Ya'akov prayed the *Amidah* facing Jerusalem, then it would only be natural for this prayer to come to mind when he stood at the Temple Mount—and for him to carve his own words echoing the daily prayers in his mind.

The ending of this prayer, *amen v'amen selah*, especially reflects and invites oral performance of Jewish prayer. Both terms are found in biblical sources associated with

prayer, particularly the Psalms. In Nehemiah (8:6), 1 Chronicles (16:36), and Deuteronomy (27:15–26), *amen* is used as a communal response to a prayer leader's acclamation. This use continues in Second Temple sources (e.g., 1QS 2:10, 18; 1 Cor 14:16; see Schlier, 1964), the Mishnah (e.g., m. Ber. 8:8), and later rabbinic sources (e.g., b. Ber. 53b; b. Shabb. 119b). Whether in Hebrew letters or in Greek transliteration, *amen* appears not uncommonly in Greek and Latin Jewish epigraphy, including funerary epigraphy (Noy, 1993, p. 339).

Selah's meaning is more ambiguous. The term appears in the Hebrew Bible 71 times, 68 of which are in the Psalms and three in Habakkuk 3. The term seems to occur at the end of a stanza or a line, as in Psalm 54:5:

For strangers have risen against me,
and ruthless men seek my life;
they are unmindful of God.
Selah. (NJPS)

Among the many possible interpretations of *selah* in antiquity, two main lines of interpretation stand out. One, associated with Greek translation, renders it as a term signifying music or a pause in a text. The other, associated with Aquila, Targum Onkelos, Jerome, and one tradition in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Eruv. 54a), renders it "forever" (Candiard, 2014, pp. 231–36; Lyon, 2018). The first postbiblical usage of *selah* in an oral ritual is in 11Q11 (Lyon, 2018, pp. 203–6), a usage that

Figure 6. Ein Gedi floor mosaic inscription, Palestine, fifth to seventh centuries. Image used under Creative Commons license from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Epigraphy_mosiac_from_eingedi_shul.jpg.

continues in other sources such as Aramaic incantation bowls and synagogue inscriptions (Lyon, 2018, pp. 221–32).2 These sources illustrate how *selah* was used in ritual (Levine, 2005, pp. 576–77), recording acts of prayer using both *amen* and *selah*—particularly in the *amen*, *amen*, *selah* formula in our inscription.

In the Ein Gedi synagogue floor mosaic inscription (*CIIP* 4/2.3853, Figure 6), which records a curse on anyone who betrays a fellow Jew to Gentiles, the formula is recited by a community to affirm a curse on a traitor:

Anyone causing a controversy between a man and his friend, or whoever slanders his friends before the Gentiles or whoever steals the property of his friend, or whoever reveals the secret of the town to the Gentiles – He whose eyes range the whole world and who sees hidden things, He will set his face on that man and on his seed and will uproot him from under the heavens and all the people said: Amen and Amen Selah (הלס ומאו ומא). (Misgav, 2021)

This contains the exact phrase of our inscription, and seems to record an act of communal prayer, what Yardeni and Price refer to as "a solemn decision taken by the whole community" (*CIIP* 4/2.3853). This inscription echoes the biblical uses of *amen*, and the postbiblical uses of *selah*, in which a community orally affirms a leader's words.

The conjunction of *amen* and *selah* also occurs in Judean synagogue inscriptions blessing donors (Hachlili, 2013, pp. 517–20; Levine, 2005, pp. 382–90). At the Ḥammat Gader synagogue, which dates between the fourth and seventh centuries, the formula appears several times across four inscriptions (*CIIP* 5/2.7371-7375).3 One reads:

Remembered for good be ʾAda son of Tanḥum and his child, who gave one tremis (=one-third gold dinar), and Yose son of Qaroʿah and his child, who gave half of a dinar – towards this mosaic. May they have a blessing. Amen, Selah, Shalom.

Donor inscriptions need not be prayed out loud to communicate their message, but the inclusion of *amen*, *selah* in this one seems to ask its viewer to speak an oral prayer for this donor. This inscription is not graffiti like Ya'akov's, since it was planned as an integral part of the building by its builders. Yet it performs one of graffiti's common functions. It marks one's name in public space, in sacred space, and asks its viewers to remember its writer—just as Ya'akov ben Yosef did.

The phrase also appears in apotropaic contexts, pleas for God to intercede for healing, as attested in Aramaic amulets found in the land of Israel, as well as in two traditions from the Babylonian Talmud (b. Yoma 84a; b. Baba Batra 73a). For example, a silver amulet found at the Dead Sea (*CIIP* 4/2.3973), dating between the fifth and the seventh centuries CE, includes the formula three times, as in: "Be healed Quzma, son of Salminu, from all pain from this day and to eternity. Amen, Amen, Selah" (lines 10–12).4 Although the Babylonian Talmud is removed from the Palestinian context of our inscription, its traditions also suggest a magical belief in the efficacious power of writing words:

Rabba said: Seafarers related to me when a wave that sinks a ship appears with a ray of white fire at its head, we strike it with clubs that are inscribed: I am that I am, *Yah*, the Lord of Hosts, amen amen, Selah (אמן אמן סלה). And the wave then abates. (b. Baba Batra 73a)

Though this tale is far-fetched, Ya'akov may have likewise held a sense that writing these words affected the world in ways typically deemed by scholars as 'magic' (Frankfurter, 2019). In late antique Judaism, such magical uses of writing are represented by the Aramaic magic bowls as well as discussions of writing

2 - A review of the Jewish Greek and Latin inscriptions in Noy did not reveal any use of *selah*, though the transliterations *amen* and *shalom* (peace) appeared frequrently. See (Noy, 1993, 1995).

3 - Other examples include *CIIP* 5/1.6231 and 6232 (Ḥuqoq), 5/1.6653 (Tiberias), 5/1.6013 ('Alma, made by artisan), 5/2.7532 (Kokhav ha-Yarden), and 5/2.7802 (Reḥov).

4 - Other examples include *CIIP* 5/1.6047, 5/1.6685, and 5/1.6686.

the Tetragrammaton (Bohak, 2019; Waller, 2019). Some late antique Jews believed that written amulets—such as mezuzah and tefillin—could bring about divine protection and ward off disease or harm (Cohn, 2008; Jansson, 1994; Kotansky, 2019). By using the phrase *amen*, *amen*, *selah*, Ya'akov ben Yosef may invoke such magical uses of writing, or at least do so for some readers.

Ya'akov ben Yosef's inscribed prayer, particularly its visually emphasized words *amen*, *amen*, *selah*, thus reflects the milieu of oral Jewish prayer. It also invites such prayer. As Karen Stern writes of other late antique Jewish inscriptions, there seems to be some hope that viewer might "pause when they saw their inscriptions, read through their messages, and, if possible, recite them out loud before a specific deity: in this case, before the Jewish God" (K. B. Stern, 2019, p. 71). This graffiti writer wanted to be remembered as much as he wanted to see the Temple rebuilt. And in leaving his name on the Temple Mount, Ya'akov changed that space, inscribed Jewish presence on it, and created a dialogue with pilgrims to come.

4. Location and Possible Pilgrim Graffiti

A multimodal approach to epigraphy situates it not only on the wall, but in social and temporal contexts—both its creation and its ongoing reception by diverse

Figure 7. Hexagonal Pilgrim's Jar with Jewish Symbol. Byzantine, ca. 578–636. Public domain image from https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/465957.

audiences. As Steele points out in her contribution to this issue, writing in hallowed spaces changes those spaces, creating a dialogue between past and present (Steele, forthcoming). Following my argument that this inscription reflects and invites oral prayer, I contextualize this inscription as a devotional pilgrim graffito, following previous scholars who see pilgrimage as Ya'akov's most likely context (Mayer, 1930; Ben-Dov, 1986; Di Segni, 2021). I also focus on its pilgrim viewers and readers, and what it may have meant for them.

Though Jewish presence in and pilgrimage to Jerusalem are not well-attested after the second century, extant sources do allow us to paint a partial portrait (Limor, 2021; Koltun-Fromm, 2018; Neis, 2013; Hezser, 2011, pp. 382–88; for a broader view, see Gitlitz and Davidson, 2005). While some suggest that Hadrian banned the Jews from Jerusalem in the wake of the second century Bar-Kochba revolt, other sources point to Jews visiting the city. Jerome (Commentary on Zephaniah 1:15-16, fourth cent.) and the Bordeaux pilgrim (c. 333) both mention Jews returning to Jerusalem, especially the Temple Mount, to mourn on Tisha b'Av (Limor, 2021, p. 312; *The Bordeaux Pilgrim*, n.d.). Material traces of such Jewish pilgrims may survive in small glass bottles and flasks with Jewish symbols (Figure 7), which pilgrims may have used to carry anointing oil (Barag, 1970; Evans, 2012, no. 72). Rabbinic texts describe scenes of Jews mourning at the Temple Mount (e.g., Sifre Deut 43:3; b. Mo'ed Qatan 26a). Neis convincingly argues that such texts may be read as pilgrim narratives, whether or not they reflect regular religious practice (Neis, 2013). Such narratives are brief compared to the lengthy Christian pilgrim texts of the time, such as a letter about (or by) Paula the Elder (Jerome, Letter 46, in White, 2010, pp. 165–78) and the Christian woman Egeria's narrative of her journey through Egypt, Mesopotamia, Turkey, and the Holy Land (McGowan and Bradshaw, 2018). Yet for many audiences, such stories may have reinforced the theological centrality of the Holy City or enabled them to imagine travelling there (Gordon, 2019). From the seventh century onward, the presence of Jews living in Jerusalem seems to have increased again, at times with the financial support of diaspora Jewry (Di Segni and Tsafrir, 2012, pp. 440–46; Kadari and Vachman, 2020, pp. 198–99). We can thus imagine this inscription as part of a history of Jewish pilgrimage to the Holy Land in late antiquity and the early Islamic era.

Ya'akov's inscription stands alongside many late antique Jewish pilgrim graffiti in the Holy Land (Di Segni, 2021). On the Temple Mount, for example, a now-lost graffito (likely sixth cent. CE or later) records the names of "Yonah and Shabatiya his wife, from Sicily" (*CIIP*, 1/2.2017), while a still-visible graffito quoting Isaiah 66:14 (fourth cent. or later) expresses hope for the rebuilding of the Temple (*CIIP* 1/2.790; Figure 8). These Jewish graffiti are dwarfed by the massive quantity of Christian pilgrim graffiti found in the Holy Land and elsewhere (Whiting, 2021; Handley, 2017; Yasin, 2015). One Christian travel narrative, the Piacenza pilgrim (c. 570), narrates leaving such a graffito:

Then we went three miles to Cana, where the Lord attended the wedding (John 2), and we reclined on his very couch, where I (unworthy!) inscribed the names of my parents.... Two of the water jugs are [still] there and I filled one of them with wine and I lifted it, full, onto my shoulders and made an offering at the altar and we washed in that same spring for a blessing (*The Piacenza Pilgrim*, n.d., 4).

Not only did the pilgrim leave his trace at the site through inscribing his parents' names—thus leaving a part of them at the site too—but he also engaged in the materiality of the site through his senses. He filled a jug with wine, re-enacting the attendants in the Gospel narrative, and then lifted it and washed his body in the spring. Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish traveler who visited Jerusalem in 1170, recounts that he witnessed Jews writing their names on the wall of the pool used by Temple priests before they made sacrifices (Benjamin of Tudela, 1907, p. 23). Such sensory, ritualized acts formed the material aspect of belief and impacted believers more deeply than mere texts or theology. While texts describe the myths and theological memories associated with sacralized spaces, rituals build them with the mortar of lived religion.

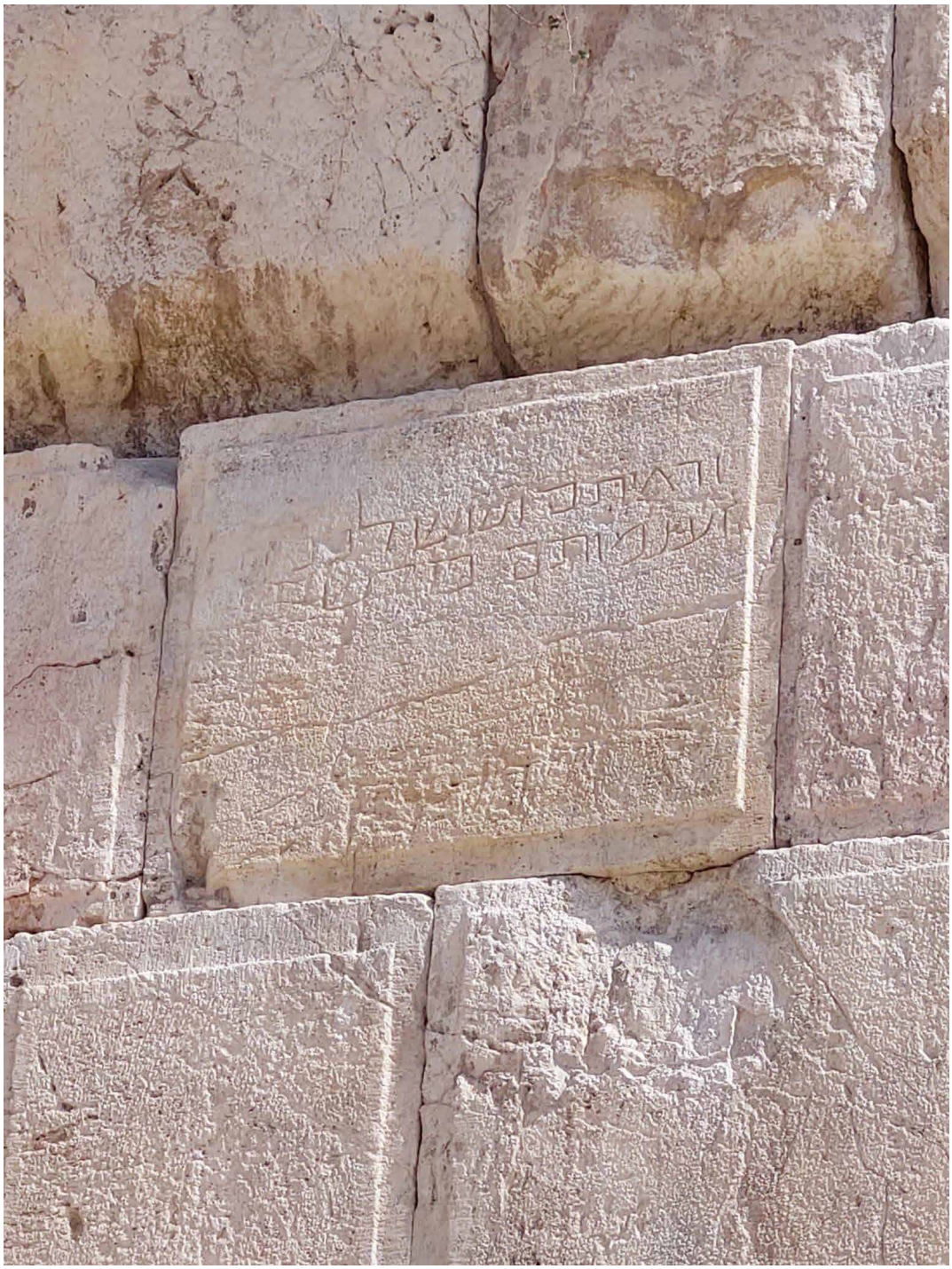

Figure 8. Isaiah 66 inscription in Western Wall. Image taken 2021. Image used under Creative Commons license from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Isaiah_Stone,_Western_Wall.jpg.

Figure 9. Jews at Wailing Wall, ca. 1900–1920. Photographer unknown. G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Public domain image from https://loc.gov/pictures/resource/matpc.05382/.

Figure 10. Prayer papers in Western Wall, 2010. Image used under Creative Commons license from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jerusalem-Klagemauer-50-Gebetszettel-2010-gje.jpg.

For both Jewish and Christian graffiti, the act of writing was often as important as the act of viewing the graffito (K. B. Stern, 2018; Yasin, 2015). Writing one's name at a site, much like a modern street writer's tag, is a way to make oneself present in the world. As one observer writes, "signatures scatter the self" (Dukes, 2020, p. 13).

Writing one's name at a holy site left a trace of oneself at the site considered close to God. Just as one's spoken prayers may be more efficacious at such a site, so one's written prayers may be too. Further, sacred space is constantly constructed through bodily practices, practices that enact and act on emotions (Smoak, 2018, pp. 256–58). Texts on the theological centrality of the Temple or Jerusalem are inseparable from rituals such as circling the Mount and praying at its gates (Kadari and Vachman, 2020, pp. 208–9) or tearing one's clothes anytime one enters Jerusalem (y. Ber. 9.1; b. Moed. Qat. 26a; see Neis, 2013, pp. 247–52). But rituals impact people in ways texts alone do not. Conversely, other late antique Jewish sources attest to blessings to be offered at sites of divine deliverance, such as Jericho or the Sea of Reeds (e.g., b. Ber. 54b; see Gribetz, 2017, pp. 320–24; Neis, 2013, pp. 228–48). Writing one's name on the Temple Mount similarly imbues a sacralized space with significant memory.

Such embodied rituals are seen in many late Ottoman and British Mandate-era photos of the Western Wall that depict Jews at prayer with Hebrew names painted on the stones (Figure 9; Goren, 2018, p. 213; Wallach, 2020, pp. 159–68). Painting or carving one's name into the stones of the Temple Mount would be seen as an act of supreme desecration today. The British Mandate government banned it shortly after the 1929 riots, and the Israeli government followed suit (Wallach, 2020, pp.

171–86). Yet as Wallach and Stern note, this distinctly contemporary notion of graffiti as vandalism does not fit premodern Jewish pilgrims to Jerusalem, many of whom scribed such graffiti as a form of devotion, perhaps even pious beautification. Though Western Wall graffiti is now banned, the practice persists in the custom of writing prayers on slips of paper and wedging them between the stones of the wall, which began in the nineteenth century (Figure 10). These slips also extend one's presence at the holy site, though for a much briefer time than Ya'akov's prayer (Goren, 2018, p. 213; Wallach, 2020, pp. 185–86). Now, one can even email a message for others to print and slip into the wall. This practice is the contemporary descendant of Ya'akov ben Yosef's graffito. Like today's Jew who crams her paper name between the wall's stones, he sought to leave his name and a piece of his self at the site.

By leaving one's name at a site, the pilgrim also transforms it for future pilgrims. While Ya'akov's graffito is no longer visible, Jews today wax poetic about the Isaiah graffito (Figure 8) with wonder, as in a rabbinic sermon delivered in 2011:

The graffiti artist thought that Isaiah's words of reassurance and renewal were being fulfilled in his own day. Not even thirty years after the Holocaust, seeing the Jewish people returned to its land and building a free society, those Israeli archeologists must have been thinking exactly the same thing. The graffiti artist wasn't wrong. He was simply 1600 years ahead of his time. But he, and others like him, are the reason why that dream stayed alive. (Scheinberg, 2011)

This rabbi sees himself as a successor to our ancient letterer. Following in the footsteps of the Turners' description of pilgrimage as an experience of *communitas*—liminal bonding with fellow pilgrims apart from the social structures and divisions of mundane social life—Barush argues that pilgrim art creates a kind of "temporal *communitas*" in which pilgrims from different eras can touch one another through their material remnants (Barush, 2021; see also Wright-Ríos, 2025, pp. 148–58). Though Ya'akov ben Yosef's graffito no longer exists, and though it was not publicly visible for centuries before, we can imagine it creating a similar experience of communitas for later pilgrims, an experience not dissimilar to Rabbi Scheinberg's sermonic reflection on the Isaiah graffito.

Finally, in an epoch when Jewish presence in Jerusalem—both residents and pilgrims—stood at an ebb, when the Holy Land was controlled by Christian and then Muslim powers, one cannot underestimate the importance of Hebrew script being present at the Temple Mount.

In contemporary study of graffiti, a key concept is the "linguistic landscape," a term which refers to "the visibility of languages on objects that mark the public space in a given territory" (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006, p. 8). Studies of linguistic landscapes focus on the way visible language marks, creates, and contests power relationships and social relations. In a multiethnic city, for example, linguistic landscapes with different languages may communicate the presence of immigrant neighborhoods—as well as those communities' claim to visibility in the public sphere. Any city's linguistic landscape reflects a visual representation of that city's identity. Unofficial writing, or graffiti, also forms part of this landscape, one which often speaks for voices not included in official or authorized markers in that landscape. In the many different written voices of such a landscape, one can see the "surface commons" of a city in which many communities jostle for visibility and attention (Andron, 2024).

The presence of Hebrew at the Temple Mount changed the site's linguistic landscape, affirming Jewish presence through the use of Jewish written language. During this period, Christians mapped their memories and built their religion onto the Holy Land. Jewish memory of the land became the palimpsest for the Christian authors who mapped Gospel stories onto Roman Palestinian sites, such as Egeria, the Bordeaux Pilgrim, and the Piacenza Pilgrim. They erected churches and monuments that associated the land with events from the lives of Jesus and his apostles, not just with memories of Hebrew Bible figures they shared with Jews (Limor, 2021). For some Christian writers, the Jewish absence from the land proved that their religion had superseded Judaism.

In this context, the presence of Hebrew script, intrinsically associated with Judaism, marked Jewish presence in the land—not only in the past and present, but also in the pilgrim's hoped-for imminent future (K. B. Stern, 2018). Putting Hebrew on this site, especially at a time when few Jews spoke Hebrew, was an act of linguistic defiance (Yadin-Israel, 2020, pp. 62–66). In a parallel way, in the modern era, the presence of Hebrew on the Western Wall became a part of the Zionist project to make Jewish history visible in the land of Israel (Wallach, 2020). In both eras, Hebrew becomes part of a politics of display, a proxy for Jewish presence in the public sphere (Promey, 2001).

5. Conclusions

Though Ya'akov ben Yosef's inscription is relatively minor in the study of Jewish epigraphy, this essay has shown how even a minor inscription can be part of larger scholarly narratives. While the inscription is difficult to place in time, it is still possible to understand it against the backdrop of a variety of contexts. This essay focused on its visual layout and use of spacing compared to manuscripts, its layout and texts as both reflecting and generating oral prayer, and its visuality and vocality as a part of Jewish pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the shaping of sacred space. Though this inscription is destroyed, and though his hopes for the rebuilding of the Temple remain unfulfilled, Ya'akov ben Yosef now lives on in this article. In future research, I hope to explore the role of visual layout and graphic design in other Jewish and Hebrew inscriptions, and their relationship to manuscripts.

Conflict of Interests and ethics

The author(s) declare no conflict of interests. The author(s) also declare full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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