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New Find: Jerusalem's Oldest Hebrew Inscription

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the 2012 excavations at the Ophel in Jerusalem, which is located between the Temple Mount and the City of David, Eilat Mazar's team discovered a large building that dates roughly to the early Iron IIA Age (ca. 1000–900 BC).1 The building was constructed on bedrock, but since there was a dip at one point in the bedrock, seven pithoi (large storage jars) were placed in this 'depression' as part of a fill to stabilize the earth under this section of the building.2

One of the pithoi (Pithos 1; see Fig. 1), of the Type B variety, was inscribed with writing along the rim while the clay was still moist, thus before the jar entered the potter's kiln. The text was written in a script that has parallels from Tel Batash/Timnah, Izbet Zartah, Khirbet Qeiyafa, Tel Fekheriyeh, and several other sites (see Fig. 2). The purpose here will be to discuss several important details related to the Ophel inscription, including the transcription and translation of the text, the dating of the inscribed rim-sherd, and the language of the script.

Figure 1a: Inscribed Potsherd (Israel Exploration Journal)

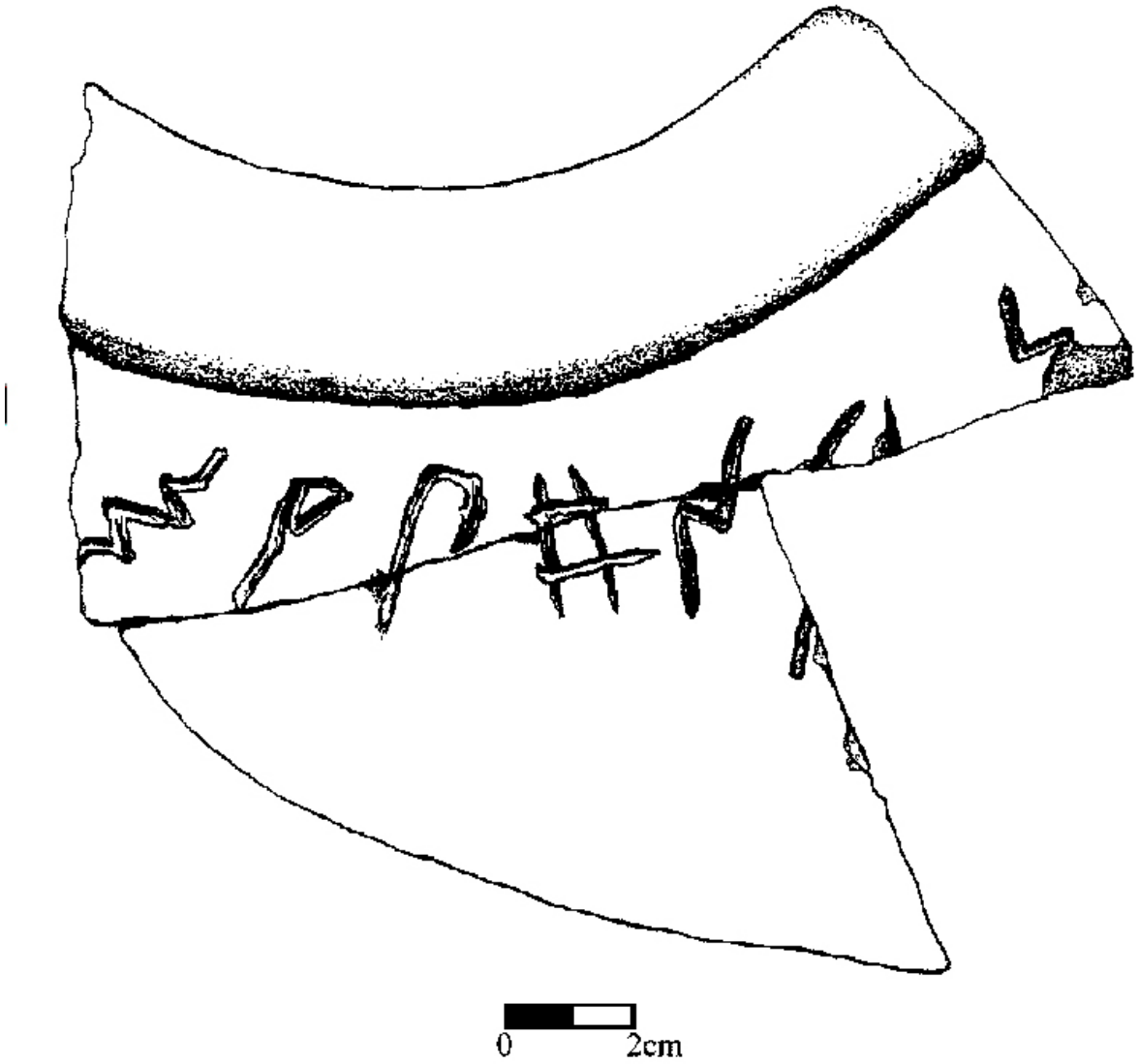

Figure 1b: Drawing of Inscribed Potsherd (Israel Exploration Journal)

Figure 2: Comparative Chart of Letters (Israel Exploration Journal and Prof. Shmuel Ahituv)

II. TRANSCRIPTION OF THE OPHEL INSCRIPTION

Direction for Reading the Text. Rollston correctly observed that the script of the Ophel inscription ultimately derives from the so-called 'Proto-Sinaitic' script of the (Egyptian) New Kingdom (NK) inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadim, although the present writer prefers the alternative designation, 'proto-consonantal'.3 Scholars such as Shmuel Ahituv and Christopher Rollston are correct that the text of the Ophel inscription reads left-to-right, rather than right-to-left, which is atypical—though not unprecedented—for Hebrew text. There are several indicators that demonstrate why the inscription reads left-to-right.

First, as Rollston pointed out, the stance of the letter nun ("n"), the fifth letter from the left (see Fig. 1), is in the reverse order not only from Phoenician, but from most contemporary inscriptions in Israel (see Fig. 2).4 This also can be observed by comparing the fifth letter from the left in Fig. 1 with the N under Phoenician in Fig. 3. In other words, the initial vertical stroke in this nun was drawn downward, followed by a horizontal stroke to the left, whereas most other nun's were begun with a downward vertical stroke followed by a horizontal stroke to the right. Examples of the standard form of nun are found on the inscriptions from Qeiyafa, Zartah, Walaydah, Tekke, Gezer, Eshtemoa, and Fekheriyeh.

Second, and assuming that the third letter from the left is a lamed ("l"), which the present writer believes to be true, the direction of the lamed betrays that the text reads left-to-right. The Hebrew lamed derives from the Middle Egyptian hieroglyph S39 in the standard

hieroglyphic Sign List (hereafter 'S.L.'), which depicts a shepherd's crook/staff (Fig. 4). As with Hebrew writing of this phase in Israel's history, Egyptian could be written left-to-right or right-to-left. The shepherd's staff was written in such a way that the shorter end (i.e. handle side) was depicted on the opposite side from the direction from which the text was read.

Figure 3: Chart of Proto-Consonantal Letters (Courtesy of Brian E. Colless)

Figure 4: Chart of Middle Egyptian Hieroglyphs from the Sign List (S.L.)

In other words, if the text reads left-to-right, the short end of the staff was placed on the right, as with the Ophel inscription. On the Fekheriyeh inscription, which was written right-to-left, the crook's handle appears on the left side (see Fig. 2), just as the inscription's nun features a second stroke that was made horizontally to the right (the opposite of how the leftmost nun appears on the Ophel inscription). Therefore, the Ophel inscription indisputably was written left-to-right, even though most contemporary inscriptions were not. When speaking of contemporary inscriptions here, any time in the Iron IB (1150–1100 BC) or Iron IIA–B Age (1000–732/701 BC) is meant.5

First Visible Letter. The vital part of Pithos 1 consists of two potsherds that were rejoined by Mazar's team. The wording of the main potsherd begins so close to the left edge of the sherd that one or more letters may have been connected to this letter, in such a way that part or much of that word has not been preserved. The first visible letter consists of a jagged series of contrasting—mostly straight—strokes, anywhere from 5–7 in number. This letter is read as mem ("m") by Ahituv, Rollston, Colless, Demsky, and the present writer. Thanks to numerous parallels from many other contemporary sites, there is no disputing how the letter reads.

Second Visible Letter. The second letter from the left is far more challenging to read than the first letter. Ahituv and Rollston both read qof ("q"), while Colless and Demsky read resh ("r") here.6 The stylistic drawing of the letter resh in the NK inscriptions at Serabit,7 which Albright dated to 1550–1450 BC,8 was a head drawn in profile (see Fig. 3, under R in Sinai column), a derivative of the Egyptian head-in-profile hieroglyph (D1 in S.L.; Fig. 4).9 Many of the heads in the resh's on the Serabit inscriptions were drawn differently from one another, and one of them resembles more of a 'P' shape (Sinai 352),10 similar to the second letter in the Ophel inscription.

Nonetheless, by the time of the Iron-Age inscriptions, the head usually was placed erect on a long neck. Unlike the qof, which included a circle atop a vertical stroke, the resh featured a somewhat triangular head on its stem. On the Qeiyafa inscription, for example, the resh on line 5 resembles a triangular 'head-on-neck' grapheme, featuring an inward bend in the vertical stroke as one moves up the left side of the head.11 If the second letter of the Ophel inscription does display a similar triangular head, it would parallel the Qeiyafa resh almost perfectly. For all of the reasons above, the best option for the second letter of the Ophel inscription is a resh.

Third Visible Letter. The third letter in the Ophel inscription carries with it more scholarly disagreement. Rollston and Demsky see this letter as a lamed, while Colless and Ahituv favor a peh ("p"). The only clear parallel for the peh reading is from Zartah, though this text is read right-to-left. Possible parallels written in the same direction come from Qeiyafa and Walaydah, though they are uncurved at the top, unlike the letter in the Ophel inscription.

Possible parallels written in the opposite direction come from Kefar Veradim, Gezer, and Fekheriyeh, the last of which also is uncurved at the top. The only clear parallel for the lamed reading is from Fekheriyeh, though Zartah offers a possible parallel as well. A comparison of the lamed and the peh from Fekheriyeh suggests that the Ophel letter is more likely to be a lamed than a peh, but this is far from conclusive evidence.

The third letter does have a number of parallels from the earlier NK-era texts at Serabit, including Sinai 354 and Sinai 356, which also feature the handle of the crook facing right.12 If the sixth letter on the Ophel inscription is actually a lamed, which Ahituv considers a possible reading, the third letter must be a peh. Due to the unlikelihood of this, plus the factors mentioned immediately above, the present writer strongly prefers a lamed over a peh for the third letter.

Fourth Visible Letter. The Ophel inscription's fourth letter is undisputed, thankfully. Ahituv, Rollston, Colless, and Demsky all read Het (x) here, which undoubtedly is correct. The best parallel for this letter, which was drawn much like a tic-tac-toe board, is from Tel Batash (see Fig. 2). The Eshtemoa ḥet is a near parallel as well.

Fifth Visible Letter. The fifth letter in the Ophel inscription also is undisputed: the letter nun ("n"). The closest parallel for this nun is from Kefar Veradim (Fig. 2), although the nun from the latter site does not have nearly the same lengthy vertical stroke on the left side as does the letter on the Ophel inscription. This is probably just a matter of artistic flare.

Sixth Visible Letter. The sixth letter in the Ophel inscription is the most difficult to read among all of the visible letters. Colless and Demsky are uncertain about assigning a letter to it, though Rollston opts for a resh ("r") and Ahituv considers it as possibly being a lamed. The only strong parallel for a lamed is from the Qeiyafa ostracon (Fig. 2), which features a pincer-like letter that mainly consists of one curved stroke with symmetrical sides, if divided in half lengthwise. No other parallels seem to be found among other contemporary inscriptions.

The glaring weakness with taking this letter as a lamed is that the Ophel inscription also betrays a portion of a seemingly straight stroke that possibly extends from the bottom and center of the pincer-like stroke. Unfortunately, the central area of the letter is obscured, since a lacuna in the letter is formed by a break in the potsherd. Unfortunately, there are no other letters from contemporary inscriptions or those from Serabit that parallel the sixth letter on the Ophel inscription better than the lamed, despite this letter's failure to account for the vertical stroke that is mostly obscured by the break in the pithos. Therefore, no given letter will be assigned to it by the present writer, following Demsky's wise decision to avoid pure guesswork.

Seventh Visible Letter. The seventh letter in the Ophel inscription is partially broken off by the break in the potsherd (Fig. 1), but enough of the letter has been preserved to make its identity clear. Rollston favors a shin (v) here, assuming that the letter was turned on its side.13 Certainly proto-consonantal script is known to have featured letters turned on their side, but the seventh letter here does not resemble a sideways shin at all.

According to lines 1 and 2 of the Qeiyafa inscription, the shin resembles an Arabic '3' more than anything else,14 which form actually is the result of the w-shaped shin from the earlier inscriptions at Serabit (Fig. 3) that was turned on its side. The difference with the Qeiyafa shin is that the shape of its '3' was inverted 90° to the left from the earlier form.15 Nothing in the sixth letter of the Ophel inscription matches these other representations of the shin.

Ahituv, Colless, and Demsky all favor the reading of nun here, despite the fact that a differently shaped nun was written as the fifth letter in the Ophel inscription. In reality, both forms of nun are attested among contemporary inscriptions, with that of the seventh letter appearing at Qeiyafa, Batash, and Fekheriyeh. Near-parallels can be found at Zartah and Tekke.

Therefore, this letter should be considered a nun, without dispute. Thus the present writer finds himself fully in agreement with all of the transcriptions of Professor Demsky (see Table 1), except that Demsky apparently reads an incidental space for the place where the present writer believes there to be a letter, albeit one that is presently unknown or indecipherable.

Table 1: Various Readings of the Visible Letters in the Ophel Inscription

As for possible readings, Demsky has suggested that the first two letters (mem-resh) complete a word begun with a letter that was located to the left of the main potsherd, and thus is no longer visible due to the break in the sherd. He points to several possibilities: ḥet-mem-resh (rm,x,), meaning "wine" (Deut 32:14; Isa 27:2); or ḥet-mem-resh (rm,xo), meaning "homer" of wheat or barley (Num 11:32; Lev 27:16).

He then takes the following lamed, the third visible letter, to be a lamed of possession. Following lamed, he interprets the ḥet-nun-nun (!n"x') as representative of a standard Hebrew name, Hanan (as seen in 1 Chr 8:23; Ezra 2:46; Neh 7:49). Putting all of this together, he sees a quantity of a commodity such as wine, wheat, or barley contained within the pithos and having belonged to some unknown Hanan.

Demsky's choice for a/the first word certainly is plausible, given that the pithos was a large storage jar that undoubtedly contained a commodity of some type. The choice of a lamed of possession certainly is plausible, given that Judah later was littered with LMLK ("belonging to the king") jars that were viewed as royal commodities. However, this reading of the lamed is dependent on his having restored a missing letter properly to the words preceding the lamed.

As for Demsky's proposal that the owner was named Hanan, this reading completely fails to account for the presence of the sixth letter, which all but Rollston have chosen not to take a stab at identifying, as well as the potentially non-incidental space that follows the sixth letter. It would be better to risk identifying this letter than to pretend a space is to be read for it and merely ignored. For this reason, in no scenario whatsoever does 'Hanan' appear to be an acceptable interpretation of the last word.

Rollston believes that the first three letters of the inscription, qof-lamed-ḥet , together form one word: "pot, cauldron" (1 Sam 2:14; Micah 3:3). He then takes the following two letters, nun-resh, to yield the name, "Ner" (1 Sam 14:50), which he says could refer to Abner the son of Ner, the commander of Saul's army, though he makes no such commitment to this association.

There are numerous problems with Rollston's translation: (1) there is no certainty that the mem (first visible letter) is not part of a previous word; (2) the reading of qof as the second visible letter in the inscription is an inferior reading of the letter; (3) the notion of possession would be far more plausible if a lamed were placed between the pot and its possessor, as Demsky has proposed in his reading; (4) as Brian Colless has pointed out, QLH ("pot") does not work for ceramic ware unless it is a cooking pot, since the word means, "cauldron, kettle, cooking pot". A storage jar or amphora simply does not fit the range of meaning of this word; (5) the QLH pot actually has a tau ("t") ending on it, whether in Hebrew or any other local tongue; and (6) the name, 'Ner', is quite dubious here, because it was demonstrated that the sixth letter almost certainly cannot be a resh. The reading of this letter seems far too forced, and perhaps even driven by this possible connection with a known Hebrew name.

The scholar who has had the greatest opportunity to study and ponder the reading of the inscription is Ahituv, who co-authored the publication of the object in the Israel Exploration Journal. He notes that the letters might refer to the name of the owner of the pithos, to its addressee, or to its contents, though there is no intelligible combination decipherable thus far.

With the absence of any further insight, he suggests that the Ophel inscription remains enigmatic at present.16 Ahituv's position is a wise one, and without a firm grasp of the sixth letter, the present writer will be hesitant about venturing a translation any time soon, if at all. The other critical problem is the unknown as to what may have been written before the first letter of the inscription and after the seventh visible letter of the inscription. As some have suggested, the inscription actually may begin with that nun, due to the space between it and the sixth letter.

III. DATING OF THE OPHEL INSCRIPTION

One of the areas of greatest dispute regarding the Ophel inscription is its date, though the inscription's dating cannot be separated from the date of the pithos on which it was written and the other pithoi that were together with it in Locus L.223C. According to Mazar, Type-A pithoi date as early as the 11th century BC, while the later Type-B pithoi (of which the Ophel

inscription is one) usually are found together with an even later sub-group of pithos where they can be dated as late as the 9th century BC. Ahituv suggests that the script of the inciser is from the 11th–10th century BC, while Mazar dates the ceramic assemblage to the 10th century BC,17 probably because of the presence of potsherds of Type A found together with those of Type B (including Pithos 1), which ceramic form rapidly followed that of Type A.

In Rollston's preliminary study of the inscription, he states that he is most comfortable with dating the inscription to the 11th century BC. The reason for Rollston's dating is the varied stance of the inscription's letters and its left-to-right writing, which was still in practice at this time, before the direction of the writing of this language allegedly was fixed during the terminal phase of the 2nd millennium BC.18

As important as Rollston's comments are, he provides no clear or convincing reason why a 10th century BC date cannot be possible. If there were support for the impossibility of left-to-right writing into the 10th century BC, his case for the 11th century BC would be stronger. Moreover, he has not dealt with Mazar's argumentation for relative dating based on the archaeological context of the inscription's potsherd.

It seems that Locus L.223C would have to be the only known context for an 11th century BC date for a pithos of the Type B variety for Rollston's dating to be accepted. The large building that was built directly over the pit with these seven pithoi dates to the early Iron IIA Age (ca. 1000–900 BC), so a date beyond the 10th century BC is certainly problematic. Therefore, until evidence should arise to validate the dating of Type B pithoi to the 11th century BC, Mazar's choice of the 10th century BC should be followed as the best possible option.

IV. LANGUAGE OF THE OPHEL INSCRIPTION'S SCRIPT

The final matter to discuss is the language of the Ophel inscription, which takes into account the origin of the written language of the text and the spoken language of the author. According to Ahituv, the inscription was incised in a proto-Canaanite/early-Canaanite script.19 Rollston concurs with this analysis, having stated that the inscription was accurately described by Ahituv as proto-Canaanite. At the same time, though, Rollston adds that this script sometimes is referred to as proto-Sinaitic or Early Alphabetic, with the latter being his preference.20

Proto-Canaanite as the language of the inscription is the choice of Ahituv and one of Rollston's choices, so this option must be evaluated. The fatal flaw of Canaanite as the language of the Ophel inscription's script is the Egyptian roots of the script, as opposed to Canaanite roots. All six of the clearly decipherable letters of the Ophel inscription find their roots in Middle Egyptian, not in Canaanite. The letters' linguistic origins will be treated in left-to-right order.

(1) The initial letter mem is a vertical wave of water that is a later variant of the horizontal wave of water, which derives from mu ("water", with 3 waves of water) of Middle and Late Egyptian (N35 in S.L.; Fig. 4) and is the lexicographical 'standard alphabetic hieroglyph' for the n sound.21 The Canaanite syllabic morpheme mu- is represented by a vertical wave of water (Fig. 5b), while the Hebrew letter m (m) is represented by a horizontal or vertical wave of water, which was chosen because of its use as the first letter in Hebrew mayim ("water").

Since the word melek ("king") of the Qeiyafa ostracon (line 4) also is written with a vertical wave of water, Canaanite mu- cannot be read here, because the Canaanite syllabic morpheme

for mu- in “king” (mulku) was a reed with two shoots. A second option for the Canaanite mu- syllabic morpheme, if a hypothetical case may be pushed, could be construed as a horizontal wave of water, but the vertical wave of water in Canaanite produces the mi- syllable, which is incompatible with the first consonant and first vowel for their word mulku. Therefore, a Hebrew m is possible for the first letter in the Ophel inscription, but not Canaanite mu-.

(2) The second letter resh is a slightly triangular head on a long neck and derives from the Egyptian head-in-profile hieroglyph (D1 in S.L.; Fig. 4), which actually consists of a neckless head in profile and often was used as a simple determinative. Determinatives were extraneous hieroglyphs with no phonetic value (i.e. not pronounced) that were placed at the end of a word to specify or clarify something about the word. However, when the D1 glyph was written with a vertical stroke beneath it, which did not touch the head and was not a neck, the value of the word changed to tp (tep = “head”) and indicated an abbreviated writing for the word ‘head’.

The Canaanite syllabary had a syllabic morpheme (ra-) that was represented by the ‘head’ grapheme (Canaanite “head” = raishu), which more resembles a pendant, with a vertical pole and a triangular object drawn outward from the left side of the pole (Fig. 5b). A helpful example of this Canaanite syllabic can be seen on the Trieste Plaque.22 This Canaanite grapheme, however, is a far cry from the resh grapheme of the Ophel inscription, which features the neck directly under the middle of the head.

Since the inscription’s second letter follows the drawing of Egyptian tp, and since resh is the Hebrew word for “head”, Egyptian proves to be the source of this written letter, and Hebrew remains an excellent candidate for the language of the script. Conversely, Canaanite ra- stands as an unrealistic option for the identity of the resh.

(3) The third letter lamed depicts a shepherd’s staff, known as a crook, and derives from the Egyptian staff/crook hieroglyph (S39 in S.L.; Fig. 4). The Canaanite syllabary contains no such grapheme for the l-sound, or any other sound. Instead, the Canaanites used a drawing of the sky with a sickle suspended from it to represent the la- syllabic (Fig. 5a), which is based on the word for “night” (laylu). Seemingly, Canaanite borrowed from the Egyptian glyph for “night” (N2 in S.L.; Fig. 4), which depicts the sky with a w3s-scepter suspended from it.

The Egyptian language presents no such trouble for the derivation of the lamed-staff as Canaanite does. The hieroglyphic S39 staff was used interchangeably with the S38 staff, which featured a far more curved handle, to denote “flocks” (‘wt) of animals such as sheep and goats, though it also could be used alone to represent the word for “scepter” (ḥq3t).

The connection of Egyptian as a source language for Hebrew is strengthened by Hebrew’s borrowing of the Egyptian glyph to represent its own letter l, since the Hebrew name for the instrument used to goad animals along was a lmd (Judg 3:31), despite the superfluous m at the beginning of dm'l.m; (“oxgoad”), due to mimation. Once again, Canaanite proves to be an impossible option for the derivation of a Hebrew letter in the Ophel inscription, while Hebrew through Egyptian serves as an ideal alternative.

(4) The fourth letter ḥet is an enclosed court, despite its similarity to a tic-tac-toe board. More aesthetically pleasing drawings of this enclosure can be seen on inscriptions from Zartah, Veradim, Gezer, and Beth Shemesh (Fig. 2). Canaanite formed three syllabics with the ḥet consonant: ḥa- (Hazīzu “rainstorm”), ḥi- (Hiwatu “life”), and ḥu- (Hudšu “new moon, month”), none of which was represented by a grapheme that remotely resembles the enclosed court of

the Ophel inscription. Canaanite ha- (= h + a-class vowel) used a temple-building glyph that was based on the Egyptian hieroglyph for a large hall in a palace or temple (O15 in S.L.; Fig. 4), but this building is not the enclosed court of the Ophel inscription, and the ha-syllabic is not a ḥet.

The only true parallel to the ḥet-grapheme is the Egyptian enclosed court (O6 in S.L.; Fig. 4), which was used for large buildings such as temples, estates, and funerary chapels.23 In the Egyptian glyph, part of the court was sectioned-off from the rest of the court. The same sectioning-off of part of the court appears on the ḥet's on inscriptions from Zartah, Veradim, Gezer, and Beth Shemesh, essentially a split through the middle of the court, long-ways (Fig. 1). The ḥet's on the Ophel and Batash inscriptions were drawn less artistically.

The predecessors to these enclosed courts are those on the walls at Serabit that date to the Late Bronze I Age (Egyptian NK), some of which feature the same division in the middle of the court, long-ways (Sinai 360; see Fig. 3: row Ḥ, column Sinai Egypt, rightmost), while others more closely resemble the hieroglyphic court of S.L. O6, with the right fore-quadrant partitioned (Sinai 361; see Fig. 3: row Ḥ, column Sinai Egypt, leftmost).24

The Hebrew word for 'court' is rcex' (Haṣer), which reflects how the letter ḥet made its way into the Hebrew language: associating the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign with the standard Hebrew word for 'court', which begins with an initial ḥet . Thus the script of the fourth letter in the Ophel inscription clearly seems to be Hebrew, while the source for the written language undoubtedly is Middle Egyptian.

Figure 5a: Chart 1 of Canaanite Syllabary (Courtesy of Brian E. Colless. Click to enlarge.)

Figure 5b: Chart 2 of Canaanite Syllabary (Courtesy of Brian E. Colless. Click to enlarge)

(5) and (6) The fifth and seventh letters are both nun, even though they represent an odd

combination of the two different types of nun's that are found in contemporary inscriptions, and thus they will be treated together. Both types of nun are jagged strokes depicting a slithering snake. The Canaanite syllabary does feature a grapheme that represents a snake, as the syllabic na- is based on the word, "snake", which in Canaanite is naHašu.

The written variants of alphabetic na-, which are shown across from N in Fig. 5b, include one form that is highly similar to the seventh letter in the Ophel inscription. However, there is no variant that accounts well for the nun of the fifth letter. Therefore, Canaanite remains a possibility for at least one nun in the inscription, but probably it is fair to say that Canaanite may not be the ideal choice as the ultimate source of derivation.

The Canaanite na- and the Hebrew nun both seem to derive from the Egyptian cobra-glyph (I10 in S.L.), which is the standard alphabetic hieroglyph for D, the last letter in the Egyptian alphabet, and is pronounced dj. The Egyptian word djdft ("snake") was the basis for this letter's entry into the Egyptian alphabet. The Hebrew word vx'n" ("snake"), found in Amos 5:19, formed the basis for the letter nun, and once again Egyptian almost undoubtedly served as the source for the drawing of the two forms of nun recorded in the Ophel inscription.

With '(proto-)Canaanite' having been eliminated as a legitimate option for the source of the Ophel inscription and its contemporary writings, a final word must be said about Rollston's precedented notion of calling the script of the Sinai inscriptions from Serabit and Magharah both proto-Canaanite and proto-Sinaitic. A similar survey of the derivation of the letters in the Sinai inscriptions would reveal the same result as found here: Canaanite is not the derivational source, though it goes beyond the scope of the present work to demonstrate that this is true.

Since there was no local community of Sinai-tians from where the writers of the Sinaitic inscriptions hailed, calling the source-language of the written inscriptions 'proto-Sinaitic' is nothing short of dubious and misleading. This would be a phantom geographical designation, while an ancient written language is connected only to an ethnic people. The fundamental question, of course, is the ethnicity of the people who inscribed the inscriptions in Sinai.

V. CONCLUSION

The Ophel inscription represents an exciting new chapter for Jerusalem's history, being that its findspot is a stratified deposit that can be dated within a precise range of time, namely by the early Iron IIA Age. Mazar dated Pithos 1 and its inscription to the 10th century BC, and her dating seems fully justified. How does this archaeological dating fit with biblical chronology?

The masterful work of Edwin Thiele, who established synchronisms between Assyrian and biblical records, combined with the recent refinements of Rodger Young, provides parameters for dating the first year of the Israelite construction of the First Temple to May of 967 BC,25 meaning that David did not capture Jerusalem until 1002 BC (2 Sam 5:6–9).26 Thus Mazar's archaeological dating of the inscription matches well with biblical chronology.

The final section of the present work, with its focus on the language of the Ophel inscription's script, demonstrated that the Ophel inscription is almost certainly written in Hebrew, with all of the legible letters finding their ultimate origins in the Middle Egyptian language, as opposed to Philistine, Phoenician, or Canaanite. The letters of the inscription match those of contemporary inscriptions, many of which form words that clearly are part of the Hebrew language. Moreover, every letter of the Ophel inscription confirmed the acrophonic nature of Hebrew, meaning that the letters of the alphabet were formed by using a word whose initial

sound was represented by that letter.

In Yosef Garfinkel's BAR article of 2012, he stated that his epigrapher, Haggai Misgav, called the language of the Qeiyafa Ostracon, "Hebrew". Garfinkel also suggested that the Gezer Calendar, the Tel Zayit Abecedary, and the Izbet Zartah Abecedary also represent an earlier phase of the Hebrew language. Finally, he asked the penetrating question of who built the Iron Age cities of Israel and Judah if these inscriptions are Canaanite, Phoenician, or Moabite.27

The present study has confirmed Garfinkel's identification of these inscriptions, and possibly others along with them, as being Hebrew writings, which is not only sensible historically and archaeologically, but also verifiable epigraphically and linguistically. The Ophel inscription was inscribed in Hebrew, and its depositional context reveals that it can be dated with relative confidence to the 10th century BC. Morever, the Ophel Inscription becomes the oldest Hebrew inscription ever uncovered in Jerusalem.

If sound biblical chronology is tested against the archaeological evidence, the result is that the Ophel inscription can be dated after ca. 1002, given that the presence of a Hebrew inscription from Jerusalem precludes an Israelite conquest of Jerusalem under David, who was the first Israelite leader to secure the future capital for the ancient Israelite state. Future publications by the present writer will attempt to demonstrate that the relationship between the Hebrew and Egyptian languages goes back even further into the 2nd millennium BC.

POSTSCRIPT

Since the publication of the above article, I have been in contact with a number of scholars, causing me to rethink several issues related to the inscription. Most helpful was my correspondence with Prof. Gershon Galil, an eminent Israeli scholar from the University of Haifa, who correctly reconstructed the letters that were mostly broken away from the remaining potsherds and accurately translated the inscription and its missing elements. Galil's drawing is presented here as Fig. 6, and he argued for this translation of the inscription at this webpage: Zwinglius Redidivus (off site link).

Figure 6: Reconstructed Reading of the Ophel Inscription (suggested by Gershon Galil)

After studying Galil's proposal, I became convinced that he has solved the mystery of the inscription's meaning for us, which also confirms the language as Hebrew. Essentially, he argues that the inscription reads from right-to-left (sinistrograde), and that it represents the following formula as a label for a commercial product: (1) regnal date (of the king), (2) classification of commodity, (3) provenience (place of production), and (4) ownership. This type of labeling was used in Egypt during the NK and in Israel during the monarchial period.

The word that functions as the 'known' from which to proceed is qlx (ḥlq), which consists of letters 5–7 (see Fig. 7) and means "smooth". This adjective requires a noun to modify, which in Hebrew always precedes the adjective. The word ends in a nun (letter 4), which led Galil to ask what noun ends in this letter and fits the strokes of the missing letter(s). The most natural word is !yy (yyn = "wine"), formed by adding two yod's (y y), which fit the lacuna perfectly, providing a reading of "smooth wine", a logical classification of the commodity.

Figure 6: Reconstructed Reading of the Ophel Inscription (suggested by Douglas Petrovich)

The first visible letter in the inscription, letter 1, either reads nun or mem, which would be the last letter in a numerical adjective modifying either the word ‘year’ or the word ‘month’. The full number of the year or month is thus lost. The difference between the letters is that a reading of nun only allows for the word ‘first’ to fit in the text, while mem would allow for ‘20th, 30th, or 40th,’ and thus refers exclusively to a year, given that there is no 20th month.

Since the nun reading seems far preferable, based on the upper part of the letter that is preserved, most likely the correct reading here was “first (month)”, yielding the full translation, “[In the ?? (regnal) year, firs]t (month): smooth [win]e from [the garden of ??]". Thus with this translation, the year-date and the vintner who produced/distributed the wine (or possibly the buyer of the wine) would be unknown. It is doubtful that the missing potsherds ever will be found, unfortunately.

What is the significance of the inscription, now that the translation is known? Most significant is that—since the inscription certainly was written in Hebrew and dates to the 10th century BC—there was an Israelite monarch sitting on the throne presumably during the century in which David and Solomon reigned. What this inscription does not do is provide any insight about the size of the Israelite monarchy or the name of its king at the time.

I have written a more thorough discussion of this inscription and submitted it to an archaeological journal for publication. Whenever a journal has accepted the article and I have news about its date and venue of publication, I will be sure to add this information below, in the ‘Comments’ section. I hope that you are as amazed about the importance of this find as I am.

Douglas Petrovich

12 August, 2013

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Footnotes:

1. These are the dates in Ephraim Stern (ed.), The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land, vol. 5: Supplementary Volume (Jerusalem/Washington, D.C.: Israel Exploration Society/Biblical Archaeological Society, 2008), 2126. Alternative dates are found in Amihai Mazar, "The Debate over the Chronology of the Iron Age in the Southern Levant," in T. E. Levy and T. Higham (eds.), The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating: Archaeology, Text and Science (London: Equinox, 2005): 16, 21. Others prefer lower dates, such as those found in Israel Finkelstein and Eli Piasetzky, "Radiocarbon dating the Iron Age in the Levant: a Bayesian model for six ceramic phases and six transitions," Antiquity 84: (2010): 381. Finkelstein dates the Early Iron IIA Age from 920–883 BC and the Late Iron IIA Age from 886–760 BC.

2. Eilat Mazar, David Ben-Shlomo; and Shmuel Ahituv, "An Inscribed Pithos from the Ophel, Jerusalem," Israel Exploration Journal 63/1 (2013): 39.

3. Rollston, "The Decipherment," http://www.rollstonepigraphy.com/?p=561. Goldwasser even went as far as to say that the alphabet was invented at Serbit (Orly Goldwasser, "How the

Alphabet Was Born from Hieroglyphs," Biblical Archaeology Review 36/2 [2010]: 42; Orly Goldwasser, "Canaanites Reading Hieroglyphs: Horus is Hathor? – The Invention of the Alphabet in Sinai," Ägypten und Levante 16 [2006]: 130), though probably it would be better to say that those who left inscriptions at Serabit were related to those who invented the alphabet.

4. Christopher Rollston, "The Decipherment of the New 'Incised Jerusalem Pithos'," http://www.rollstonepigraphy.com/?p=561, accessed 17 July, 2013.

5. A. Mazar, "Debate over the Chronology," 16. Once again, the dates here are from Stern, NEAEHL, 2126.

6. For the contributions of Prof. Aaron Demsky, see the archives of the ANE-2 List, http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ANE-2/, posted 12 July, 2013.

7. The attribution of these Semitic inscriptions to the NK is due to several factors: (1) Mining operations at Serabit and Magharah primarily were restricted to the MK and NK, and arguing for a MK date would be difficult. (2) The reinvigoration of native Egyptian control in Egypt during the 18th Dynasty saw a renewed effort to extract turquoise from the mines. Under the 18th-Dynasty pharaohs, mining teams left 92 inscriptions, while 66 inscriptions were left during the 19th and 20th Dynasties (Alan H. Gardiner, T. Eric Peet, and Jaroslav Černý, The Inscriptions of Sinai, vol. 2, Translations and Commentary [London: Oxford University Press, 1955]). Many pharaohs are attested in individual inscriptions, with the most by far under Thutmose III (29), during whose reign Egypt reached its peak imperialistically. Thus his reign is the most logical time for foreign inscriptions to appear at the mines. (3) A 2.4-cm-high Egyptian prism from Lachish ties the writings at Serabit not only to Egypt, but to the reign of Amenhotep II (1455–1418 BC), Thutmose III's son (Olga Tufnell, Lachish IV: The Bronze Age [London: Oxford University Press, 1958], Plates 37, 38: #317). Among the drawings on the four sides of the prism were the titulary of Amenhotep II, and the proto-consonantal letters Ḏ GT, which correspond to the divine appellation Ḏ GT in Sinai 353, placed next to a deity that probably is the Semitic equivalent of Shesmu, a Memphite deity regarded as patron of the winepress. The Asiatic Apiru were the chief vintners in the Nile Delta during the Late Bronze Age (William Foxwell Albright, The Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions and Their Decipherment (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3–4. The connection between these writings and Amenhotep II suggests a mid-18th-Dynasty date for the Sinai inscriptions.

8. Albright, Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions, 8. See, for example, the sign at the bottom of column 3 of the Wadi Naṣb inscription (Sinai 376) in Brian E. Colless, "The Proto-Alphabetic Inscriptions of Sinai," Abr-Nahrain 28 (1990): 8, 12.

9. James E. Hoch, Middle Egyptian Grammar: Sign List (Mississauga: Benben Publications, 1998), 9.

10. Albright, Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions, 20–21. Colless, "Proto-Alphabetic Inscriptions," 10, 35–36.

11. Alan Millard, "The Ostracon from the Days of David Found at Khirbet Qeiyafa," Tyndale Bulletin 62/1 (2011): 11.

12. Albright, Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions, 22–23. Colless, "Proto-Alphabetic Inscriptions," 10, 32–33, 36.

13. Rollston, "The Decipherment," http://www.rollstonepigraphy.com/?p=561.

14. Millard, "The Ostracon from the Days of David," 11.

15. Millard, "The Ostracon from the Days of David," 8, 9.

16. Mazar, Ben-Shlomo, and Ahituv, "An Inscribed Pithos," 47.

17. Mazar, Ben-Shlomo, and Ahituv, "An Inscribed Pithos," 39, 42–43.

18. Rollston, "The Decipherment," http://www.rollstonepigraphy.com/?p=561.

19. Mazar, Ben-Shlomo, and Ahituv, "An Inscribed Pithos," 39.

20. Rollston, "The Decipherment," http://www.rollstonepigraphy.com/?p=561.

21. Hoch, Middle Egyptian Grammar: Sign List, 40; James E. Hoch, Middle Egyptian Grammar (Mississauga: Benben Publications, 1997), 7.

22. Brian E. Colless, "The Canaanite Syllabary," Abr-Nahrain 35 (1998): 30–31. See the middle syllabic in the second column from the right, on page 31.

23. Hoch, Middle Egyptian Grammar: Sign List, 41.

24. Albright, Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions, 24–25. Colless, "Proto-Alphabetic Inscriptions," 9, 22–24. In the case of Sinai 361, the left fore-quadrant is partitioned as well, unlike with the Egyptian hieroglyph S.L. O6.

25. Edwin R. Thiele, The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994], 80; Rodger C. Young, "When Did Solomon Die?" Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 46/4 (2003): 601–602. For a development of the argument that the jubilee cycles support a date of 1446 BC for the exodus, see Rodger C. Young, "The Talmud's Two Jubilees and their Relevance to the Date of the Exodus," Westminster Theological Journal 68 (2006): 71–83. Galil did not attempt to date the beginning of construction on the First Temple (Gershon Galil, The Chronology of the Kings of Israel & Judah [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 7).

26. Andrew E. Steinmann, From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 122. With the help of Rodger Young, the present writer can offer the following reconstruction. A reasonable deduction is that David died in ca. 969 BC, and that his reign in Jerusalem began 33 years earlier (1 Sam 5:4–5), thus in ca. 1002 BC. Solomon died in Tishri of 932 BC after a reign of 40 years (non-accession reckoning), and certainly there was a coregency with David (1 Kgs 1). While there is indefiniteness in determining when David died, by about two years, he probably was dead already when construction on the Temple began in Year 4 of Solomon (1 Kgs 6:1). Since David was active in gathering material for the Temple's construction (1 Chr 29), a reasonable conjecture is that he died about 1½ years before construction of the Temple began in spring of 967 BC, thus equating to 969 BC.

27. Yosef Garfinkel, "Christopher Rollston's Methodology of Caution," BAR 38/5 (2012): 58–59.

28. Jaroslav Černý, Hieratic Inscriptions from the Tomb of Tut'ankhamūn (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1965): 22, no. 12.

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