Saeculum Christianum
vol. XXIII (2016)
pp. 3-13

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THE OLDEST HEBREW ALPHABETIC INSCRIPTIONS (THE EPIGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS)

The pretence for writing this paper was the discovery of the ostracon containing a fragment of a Hebrew alphabetic inscription unearthed in 2012 at the Ophel Hill in Jerusalem. The discovery dated back to approximately eleventh century BC aroused major interest among scholars. Some of them suggested changing the dating to the middle of the tenth century BC (the period of reign of King Solomon). Initially it had been deemed that the inscription is indecipherable but a few months after its publication propositions of its reading and interpretation emerged. They were mutually contradictory and spark a rather large amount of controversy. At the same time it became apparent that the inscription not only fell within the scope of the specialist epigraphical research but also fit in with the context of the views concerning the history of the ancient Israel, particularly the opinions on treating the Bible text as a credible historical document. The new inscription from Ophel[1] also presents an opportunity for invoking several other oldest Hebrew inscriptions, particularly in respect of the palaeographic analysis. In this context the differences and similarities between the Hebrew script of the latter half of the eleventh century and first half of the tenth century BC can be observed (although dating each of the inscriptions precisely presents a significant problem). Currently the academia possesses six oldest *Hebrew* alphabetic inscriptions: the ʾIzbet Ṣartah ostracon (the twelfth/eleventh century BC), the Tel Zayit inscription (the eleventh century – the first half of the tenth century BC), the Chirbet Qeiyafa ostracon (the twilight of the eleventh century – the first half of the tenth century BC, the period of reign of King Saul); the new Chirbet Qeiyafa inscription (dated the same as the previous one); *the new Ophel ostracon* (the eleventh century or the first half of the tenth century BC – the period of reign of King Solomon; it is also the oldest Hebrew inscription from the area of Jerusalem); *the Gezer Calendar* (the latter half of the tenth century BC – the period of reign of King Solomon or the first half of the ninth century BC). This paper serves not only as a presentation of the contemporary state of the research concerning the early Hebrew inscriptions and the related differences in opinions of researchers but also as a critical stance on certain problems of the ancient epigraphy from the territory of Israel.

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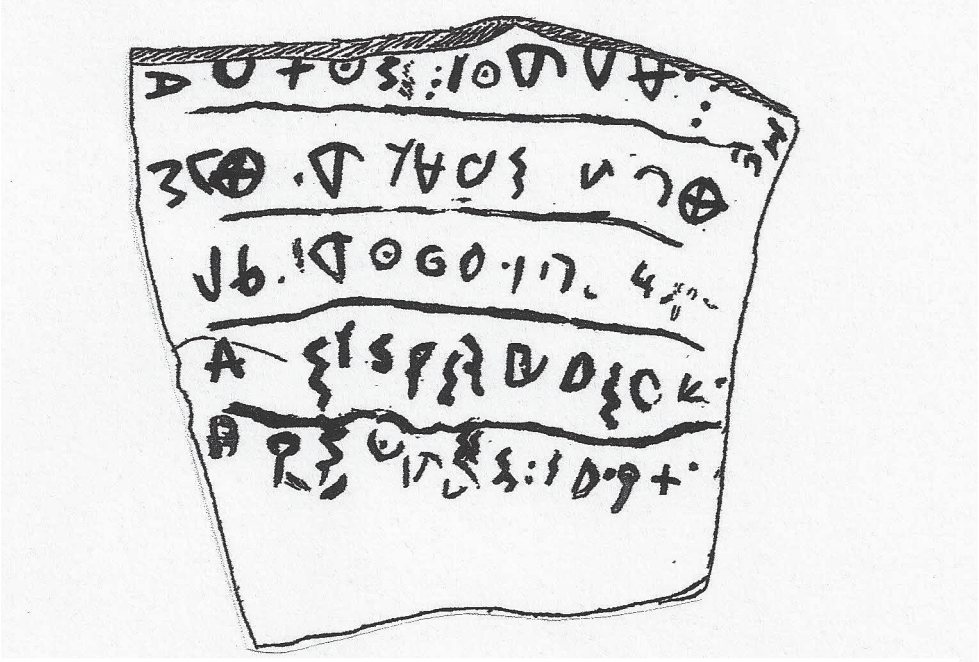
[1] The inscription from Ophel discovered in 2012 is designated as *the new inscription* in order to differentiate it from the inscription on the ostracon discovered at Ophel by James Duncan in 1924, given the name of *the Ophel Ostracon* and dated to the latter half of the eighth century BC; D. Diringer, *Le iscrizioni antico-ebraiche palestinesi*, Firenze 1934, pp. 74-79; P. Nowogórski, *Powstanie pisma hebrajskiego i jego kulturowe znaczenie,* in: *Żydzi i judaizm we współczesnych badaniach polskich*, vol. V, editor K. Pilarczyk, Kraków 2010, p. 118.

1. The Chirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon

Today there are two known examples of inscriptions from Chirbet Qeiyafa[2]. The first, inscribed on an ostracon, was discovered in 2008 and acknowledged as the oldest Hebrew inscription. The second one was discovered in 2012. The latter one is much shorter but very interesting in onomastic terms. The first inscription (pic. 1) was published in the Polish language by Professor Edward Lipiński and thus I will only discuss certain epigraphical issues pertaining to it and refer those interested to the paper published in *Studia Judaica*[3].



Transcription (from right to left):

1. ʾ l ṯ ʿ š q : w ʿ b d ʾ[l] [b] z y
2. š p ṭ. b k ʾ l m [n] š l ṭ
3. b g r. b ʿ l l. p ṣ m y [ḥ d]
4. ʾ d m w š r m y s d m l k:
5. ḥ r m ʿ [w] n. m y š. d r t[4]

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[2] Chirbet Qeiyafa is the modern name of an ancient city located on the hill on the edge of the Valley of Elah, approx. 30 km to the south-west of Jerusalem. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem has been conducting an archeological works there since 2007; see: www.qeiyafa.huji.ac.il.

[3] E. Lipiński, *Najstarsza inskrypcja hebrajska*, „Studia Judaica", 14/2011, no. 1 (27), pp. 143-150.

[4] On the basis of A. Yardeni, *Further Observations on the Ostracon,* in: Y. Garfinkel, S. Ganor (ed.), *Khirbet Qeiyafa* I. Excavation Report 2007-2008, Jerusalem 2009, pp. 259-260 and E. Lipiński, Op. Cit., p. 149.

Translation:

1. *...do not torment and serve God. The Judge*
2. *ignored the sorrow of the widow, he held power over*
3. *the household member and over the child, he split the community.*
4. *the people and the leaders established the kingdom;*
5. *they eradicated crime from the life of generations*[5].

The inscription had been written in black ink on an ostracon with the dimensions of approx. 15 cm in height by 11.5 cm to 16.7 cm and widening towards the top. The letters inscribed in five rows are arranged from left to right. Individual rows are separated with uneven black lines.

In terms of the epigraphical analysis several letters of this inscription merit particular attention:

ʾālepʾ – the first letter in row 1), its sharp tip is pointing to the right; elsewhere in the same row it is turned 90° (arranged vertically) with its sharp tip pointing downwards; whereas in row 4) it is arranged vertically but turned towards the top;

ʿayin – in row 1) and in the remaining instances it has the shape of a circle with a dot in the middle (the shape known from the earlier inscriptions from the Late Bronze period whereas this dot had begun to disappear since the tenth century BC until only the circle remained);

ṯāw – consists of two lines intersecting perpendicularly and forming the shape of a cross with arms of nearly equal length (since the tenth century BC this letter had begun to take the shape similar to "x");

šin – in row 1) and the remaining rows it is turned 90° (it is arranged vertically) and is pointing to the right;

bêṯ – in row 1) and the following rows it was written vertically with *the lower part* of the letter varying in length from the "classical" shape of this letter, in this case written on the right side of the character (*b* of such a shape appears in inscriptions from before the year 1000 BC);

pē – the second letter in row 2), the upper part of the character is pointing to the right, it differs from the shape adopted after the year 1000 BC.

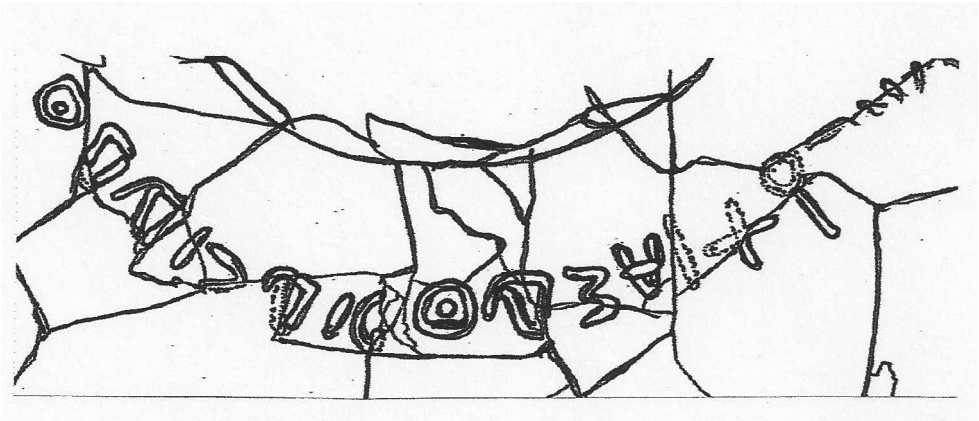
The inscription under consideration is probably a copy of an official state document prepared with the object of informing citizens of the changes which occurred in the state. On the grounds of the epigraphical analysis this inscription can be dated to the eleventh century (possibly its second half) or the very beginning of the tenth century BC. However, the shape of the characters and the manner of inscribing the text firmly places it in the eleventh century BC.

2. The *ʾIšbaʿal* (Chirbet Qeiyafa) Inscription

During the archeological works conducted within the framework of the Khirbet Qeiyafa Archaeological Project, fragments of a vessel (a pithos) were discovered in 2012 the lugs of which bear a (partial) inscription (pic. 2). This inscription consists of 12 letters, 1 cm in height, carved in clay, ten of which are readable (the first and the second character are difficult

[5] acc. to Edward Lipiński; E. Lipiński, Op. Cit., p. 149.

to decipher). The individual words of the inscription are divided by vertical lines of the same height as the letters[6]



Transcription – arranged from right to left:

ʿ d b │n b │l ʿ b š ʾ │ t̲ *or* p │ (the lower part of the letter qôp̄ could be carved in this spot, the previous character could be an upper part of the letter *p̄e* and the preceding letter *šin* – this is, however, a far-fetched hypothesis)

The letters forming this inscription are identical to the letters inscribed on the previously discussed ostracon. Slight differences are the result of a different material and the manner in which they were written. They concern the *ʾalep̄* letter set vertically, turned 90°, with the rounded tip pointing downwards. The *šin* letter was also inscribed vertically although in a soft and wavy manner instead of having sharp tips (similarly to the inscription on the ostracon). The *bêṯ* letter also has the shape similar to the characters inscribed on the ostracon although it is mirrored (in this case the lower part of the traditional character is on the left side). The *ʿayin* letter has the interesting early form (a circle with a dot in the middle). The *nûn* letter had been inscribed in the simplified form consisting of two lines joined at an acute angle on the right end of the character.

The archeological context and the palaeographic analysis enabled us to date this inscription to the last quarter of the eleventh century or the first quarter of the tenth century BC.

The words which can be deciphered without major difficulties: *ʾIszbaʿal, the son of Beda (bdʾ)*. All historians who are researching the ancient Israel should immediately associate the name of *ʾIszbaʿal* with the son of Saul who after the death of his three brothers (Jonathan, Abinadab and Malik-Szua) and the suicide of his father after the battle of the Gilboa hill (1 Samuel 31) became the king of Israelites (2 Samuel, 2,8-10). Thus he became the competitor of David for inheriting the throne of Saul. Ultimately he was defeated and murdered by the supporters of David (2 Samuel 4,5-12). However, the inscription at issue does not speak of

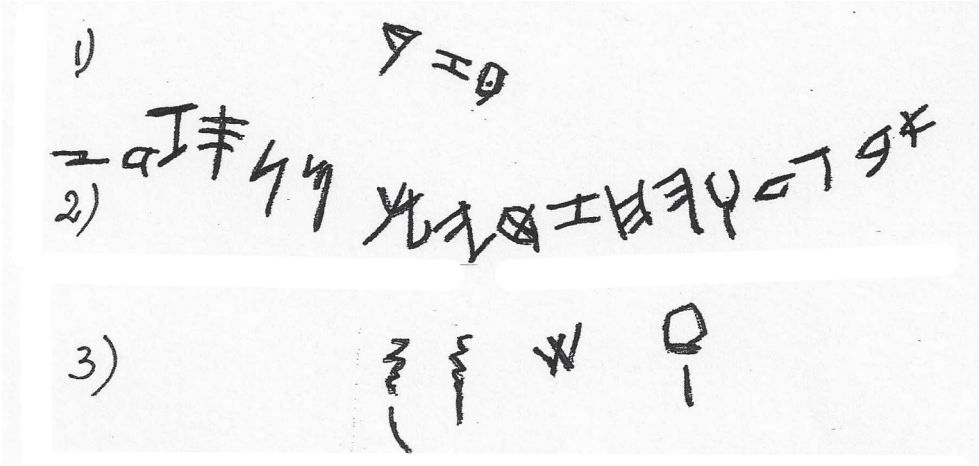
[6] See: Y. Garfinkel, M. Golub, H. Misqav & S. Ganor, *The ʾIšbaʿal Inscription from Khirbet Qeiyafa***,** „Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research", 373/2015, pp. 217-233.

the son of Saul but the son of a different Bed'a of whom we know little. It can be conjectured that he was the owner or the donor of the vessel.

Despite that this inscription is important because its contents confirm the use of the name *'Iszba'al* among the Israelites in the period retrospectively described in the Bible. All extra-biblical confirmations of names of individuals or geographical names are extremely important to the research concerning the history of the ancient Jews.

I will even dare to present the hypothesis that the similarity of the letters on both inscriptions from Chirbet Qeiyafa points towards not only the same period of their creation but maybe even *the same creator*. And even if they were not created by the same person the shape of the letters and the manner of inscribing them point towards the individualistic (local) character of the scribal workshop in this part of Judah.

3. The Tel Zayit Alphabet



Transcription (from right to left):

- row 1) ʿ z r
- row 2) ʾ b g d w h z ḥ ṭ y k l m n s p ʿ ṣ
- row 3) q š m m

The letters from the Tel Zayit inscription (in the Valley of Beth Guvrin) have different shape than the letters from Chirbet Qeiyafa[7]. During the archeological works in 2005 *an alphabet* inscribed on a calcareous bloc was discovered there. The discoverers dated the relic to the mid-tenth century BC.[8] The characters are inscribed in two rows (rows 2 and 3 presented

[7] The modern Tel Zayit is located on the Shfela and identified as the biblical city of Libnah (Joshua 10:32; 2 Kings 19:8) or Ciklag (1 Samuel 27:6) and thus located between the Judean Lakhish and the Philistine Gat (near Tel as-Safi). The excavations are conducted and funded by the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. The Judean town in this location was identified in 1999; see: www.zeitah.net.

[8] R.E. Tappy, P.K. McCarter, M.J. Lundberg, B. Zuckermann, *An Abecedary of the Mid-Tenth Century B.C.E. from the Judean Shephelah*, „Bulletin of the American Society of Oriental Research", 344/2006), pp. 5-46.

on pic. 3.) with three additional letters inscribed above[9]. The *classical* order of the letters was not preserved. There are 22 or 24 (if we acknowledge the last two characters as the *m* letters) in total. The characters from Tel Zayit are similar in shape to the early Phoenician script from Byblos and the letters of the *Gezer Calendar*[10]. However, it is difficult to recognise them as an example of the early Hebrew calligraphy. The lines of writing are not perfectly horizontal and not all characters were inscribed in detail. Certain fragments of the letters are not properly joined together. It could be the result of the material they were inscribed upon or the skills of the writer. Finally a hypothesis can be brought forth that they are an example of an exercise in writing of some pupil.

All the letters are interesting from the point of view of the epigraphical analysis because they are very characteristic of this particular inscription:

'alep̄ – has a very sharp left edge crossed with a short, diagonal line;

bêṯ – the upper part of the letter (the head) is strongly elongated and pointed, more than an oval does it resemble an ellipse or a small triangle;

gîmel – the vertical and the horizontal parts of the letter are disjointed; too *horizontal* and too long upper part and too *vertical* lower part; the early Phoenician version of the *gîmel* letter has the shorter and diagonally arranged upper line as well as the lower line set opposite (it slightly resembles the "1" digit although the versions similar to a triangle without a base do exist, for instance on the Szipitbaal inscription);

dāleṯ – consisting of two lines forming an ellipse with a sharp left verge (similar to the letters from the Late Bronze);

wāw – too angular and elongated upper part of the letter instead of fine curvature, the bottom line is also too long;

hē – the vertical line elongated downwards appears to be too long but such a form of notation existed just like the examples of the vertical line elongated upwards (e.g. in the inscription on the sarcophagus of Ahiram);

ḥēṯ – the vertical lines on the sides of the letter are to long;

zāyin – both horizontal lines (lower and upper) are too long;

ṭēṯ – the outer line is too angular and the crossing lines stick outside the oval;

yôd – the vertical and horizontal lines are too long;

lāmeḏ – also in this letter the sharp connection between the two elements of the letter instead of a fine oval transition from the lower to the upper part of the letter, which should be slightly leaning to the right, can be observed;

kāp̄ – despite retaining the shape of the trident the middle line is too elongated downwards;

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[9] There is a sign resembling W visible on the inscription located between „ṭ" and „y" (in row 2). It is possible that it is a remainder of the worn letter "m" or the letter "š", also misplaced.

[10] The early Phoenician inscriptions serving as the comparative material are: the Azarbaal inscription, the inscription on the sarcophagus of Ahiram of Byblos, the Yehimilik inscription, the Abibaal inscription and the Szipitbaal inscription; they were dated to the latter half of the eleventh century BC (the first of the listed inscriptions) and to the tenth century BC (the remaining inscriptions). Together they comprise the uniform inscription group of Byblos. At times the Nora inscription (southern Sardinia) is recognised as belonging to the group of the early Phoenician inscriptions but it is dated to the end of the ninth and the beginning of the eighth century BC and belongs to the Tyre-Sidon writings (a numerous group of inscriptions from the ninth-sixth century BC); compare: J.C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 3, *Phoenician Inscriptions including inscriptions in the mixed dialect of Arslan Tash*, Oxford 1982).

mēm – the strongly elongated and too vertical line on the left edge of the letter draws attention, the remaining part of the letter was inscribed to horizontally;

nûn – similar remarks as in the case of *mēm*;

sāmeḵ – although it is similar to the Phoenician notation its vertical line reaches too far down;

pē – instead of the oval shape it consists of two unequal horizontal lines and a vertical line connecting them;

'ayin – instead of a rather regular circle (oval) it is too angular with a line protruding downwards on the right side;

ṣāḏē – the letter lacks the short vertical line on the left verge of the letter;

qôp̄ – the letter consists of two separate (disjointed) parts, the upper part is angular instead of being circular or elliptic in shape and the lower part consists of a disjointed vertical line:

šîn- the lines in the middle cross form the shape of x, the extreme right line is not joined with the middle line (similarly to the letter found in the Szipitbaal inscription) and although the left line joins with the middle line the point of contact is not located near its lower end.

The lack of the *ṯāw* and the *rēš* letters is thought-provoking. Most probably the *rēš* letter is located on the third place in the first row and has the shape known from the *Gezer Calendar*.

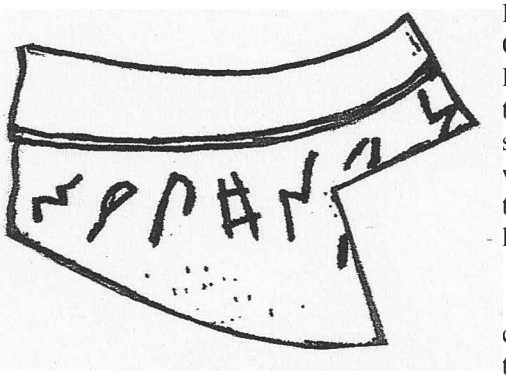
It is also worth emphasising that the two characters located to the left of the last letter (*šîn*) resemble the shape of the *mēm* letter known from the inscriptions from the Late Bronze period (e.g. the fragment of the votive vessel from Lakhish, the eighth century BC) but also those inscribed on the *Gezer Calendar* and the sarcophagus of Ahiram of Byblos. This is all the stranger because in the alphabetical order in the second row the *mēm* letter has a different shape known from the inscription from the tenth century BC.

The above epigraphical analysis indicates that the letters comprising the Tel Zayit *alphabet* differ from the early Phoenician characters and the Chirbet Qeiyafa letters. The inclination towards elongating their shape makes them similar to the letters from *the Gezer Calendar* and the angular shape of the oval parts imparts certain indigenous quality resulting from, in my opinion, the skills of the writer. The fact that the letters from the *alphabet* at issue can be compared to the letters from the Aramaic inscriptions from the tenth-eighth century BC, for instance to the inscription on the Amman Citadel (the first half of the ninth century BC) or to the Chazael inscription from approx. 825 BC is interesting. Despite all the similarities I think it is unlikely that the Tel Zayit *alphabet* was a transitory form between the early Phoenician writing and the shape of letters developed by the Israelites as the *national* Hebrew script utilised from *the Gezer Calendar* up to *the Letter from Lakhish*.

Here, for the sake of clarity, I would like to emphasise that I do not discuss another *alphabet* from the territory of Israel – the 'Izbet Ṣartah ostracon. It does not contribute to the contemporary state of the research and is not a particularly good comparative material[11].

[11] See: P. Nowogórski, Op. Cit., p. 114.

4. *The New* Ophel Inscription



In 2012 during the archeological work at Ophel hill in Jerusalem the team led by Eilat Mazar discovered in a building dated to the early Iron Age a small ostracon with several letters inscribed on it. The discovery was published in the following year[12]. In the quoted article Shmuel Ahituv reads the letters (arranged from left to right) as:

m q p ḥ n [l] [n] m

These letters, 2.5 cm in height, were classified as the proto-Canaanite script from the eleventh century BC and the entirety of the inscription was deemed as impossible to decipher in any of the Western Semitic languages.

The very same year, in 2013, the renowned epigraphic Christopher Rollston, a professor at the *John Hopkins University*[13] took a different view. In the quoted article he used the synthetic approach to present a rather convincing rendition of the inscription. Similarly to Ahituv he adopted the left-to-right arrangement of letters and deciphered the inscription as (pic. 4.):

m q l ḥ n [r] [š] or [n] m

Thereby the interpretation of Rollston differs from the one proposed by Ahituv. Instead of *pē* professor Rollston reads the character as *lāmeḏ*. By doing so it is possible to read a fragment of the text: *qalaḥaṯ* – "a pot", "a cauldron" (e.g. 1 Samuel 2,14). The classical (biblical) ending for the feminine gender *ṯāw (ת)* in the discussed inscription was supposed to take the form of *n*. However, Rollston does not persist with such interpretation and admits it is possible that the *nûn* is a part of the following word and together with *rēš* forms the name of Nēr, also known from the First Book of Samuel: Abner, son of Nēr (14,50) and this Nēr, the father of Abner and Kish, and the father of Saul were sons of Abiel (14,51). By the same token the biblical name would be confirmed in the epigraphical document referring to the history of Israel. For the record it should be noted that Christopher Rollston presents another interpretation of the second word as *nard*, the oil produced from stems and roots of a Himalayan plant *Nardostachys jatamansi*. This precious oil was used in the ancient Israel for anointing the heads of important guests. I will allow myself to note that an entire pithos of such oil would be extremely valuable. Rollston agrees with the dating proposed by Ahituv placing the inscription in the eleventh century BC and recognising it as an example of proto-Canaanite writing.

Thus a question emerges: Can findings of professor Rollston be accepted uncritically? The classification and dating of the inscription based on the shape of the *mēm* letter or the *ḥēṯ* letter known from the proto-Canaanite inscriptions do not raise doubts. It is the reading of *l* as *p* which appears problematic. At a first glance the shape of this letter in the Ophel

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[12] E. Mazar, D. Ben-Shlomo, S. Ahituv, *An Inscribed Pithos from the Ophel, Jerusalem*, „Israel Exploration Journal", 2013, vol. 63/1, pp. 39-49.

[13] Ch. Rollston, *The Decipherment of the New „Incised Jerusalem Pithos"* posted on private website www.rollstonepigraphy.com website on the 11th of July 2013.

inscription suggests reading it as *pē*. However, if we were to do so, the inscription would be unreadable. The researcher himself refers to the similarity of the letter from Ophel to the letter *lāmeḏ* found in the Tell Fakhariyeh inscription. It is the inscription in two languages (Akkadian and Aramaic) located on the sculpture depicting Adad-iṯʿi, the king of Guzana and Sikan, dated back to approximately 850 BC.[14] However, in this notation the upper part of the *lāmeḏ* letter is curled to the left (although it may result from the arrangement of the inscription). Rollston also refers to the shapes of the letters from the proto-Sinai inscriptions determined by Willam F. Albright and copied in numerous works devoted to the origins of the alphabetical script[15]. If we were to follow this lead the *l* in this particular shape can be found in the proto-Sinai inscriptions. I would like to refer to one of the better known inscriptions from Serabit al-Chadim, the inscription no. 357, dated back to the period of reign of Thutmose III (the fifteenth century BC). The tenth letter of this inscription has the form of *l* with the upper part curled to the right. Was this form of the letter used as late as in the eleventh century BC? It is difficult to provide a definite answer to this question because the comparative material is almost non-existent. In the case of the discussed Ophel inscription I support maintaining the previous reading – recognising the character in question as the *p* letter. In the earlier proto-Canaanite inscriptions the *l* letter no longer has the same form as in Sinai. Of course we can interpret it as an orthographical mistake but it would be too far-fetched of a hypothesis. If this inscription would be impossible to read it would not be an unusual problem. Our command of the vocabulary of the ancient Israelites is not perfect because the text of the Bible does not exhaust the entirety of the vocabulary the Israelites were using.

It appears that there were more letters on the pithos. If we assume the interpretation of Rollston as the correct one then the first preserved letter, *mēm* , could be, in my opinion, the last letter of the word *ši[l]lūm* – "a gift", "a tribute", for example, which corresponds with both the name Ner and the possible contents of the vessel – the nard oil.

This, however, does not conclude the discussion concerning the new Ophel inscription. In 2013 Gershon Galil, the professor of the University in Haifa, joined the discussion. He proposed two readings and interpretations. Above all else Galil assumed that the inscription had been written in the Hebrew notation used since the tenth century BC and that the letters are arranged from right to left. By taking this approach he changed dating of the inscription to the period of Solomon, the latter half of the tenth century BC.

The first reading and interpretation are very strongly hypothetical and thus I will present them solely for the sake of order:

[n t] n [t t] n ḥ l q m

Professor Gershon Galil read the inscription reconstructed in such manner as: *your poor brothers, you must give them your share*.

The other interpretation is also controversial but less "fantastical":

(also arranged from right to left) […] m [y y] n ḥ l q m

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[14] This inscription is the oldest example of Aramaic writing. J. Naveh claimed it was even older and dated it back to the eleventh century BC; see: E. Lipinski, *The Bilingual Inscription from Tell Fekheriye,* in: *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics* II, editor E. Lipinski, Leuven 1994, „Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta", vol. 57, pp. 19-81, the comparative table of Phoenician and Aramaic characters and inscriptions – p. 25.

[15] For example: J. Naveh, *Early History of Alphabet*, Jerusalem 1987, p. 25, fig. 17. One of the versions of the *l* letter on the proto-Sinai inscriptions is similar in shape to the letter from Ophel.

It was also professor Galil who identified the third letter (from the right) as *lāmeḏ*. He read the inscription reconstructed in such manner as *poor wine* (possibly *wine of poorer quality*)[16]. For him the word *ḥālāq* ("false", "bad", "poor") is the most important part of the inscription. As far as reconstructing of the following word as y*ayin* ("wine") is concerned, he proposed the interpretation that the inscription on the pithos marks the lower-quality wine provided to workers employed in Solomon's building projects at the Ophel hill in Jerusalem. He concurrently drew attention to the necessity for treating the biblical word in relation to the historicity of Solomon and his investments in Jerusalem and other Israeli cities as more credible.

In fact this conception of professor Galil is not acceptable, either. The shape of letters, as I have mentioned hereinabove, places this inscription more in the eleventh century or in the beginning of the tenth century BC and links it with the proto-Canaanite script rather than with the *national* Hebrew script used from the late tenth century BC till the 6th century BC. Professor Galil also takes too much liberty in reconstructing the two letters which were not preserved as the *y y* letters. There are no grounds for such reconstruction. Besides, was the quality of wine really indicated on the container? Perhaps, it is not beyond the realm of possibility. I consider both interpretations proposed by professor Galil as too "fantastical" to be unquestionably accepted. Professor Galil also treats the *p* character as the *l* letter too precipitately.

5. The Issue of the *Gezer Calendar*

The so called *Gezer Calendar* discovered in 1908 and dated back to the tenth century BC had for many years been considered as the oldest relic of the Hebrew script. However, in time it began to arouse suspicion. Initially these suspicions regarded the dating of *the Calendar*. Discovering the calendar outside of any historical context made precise dating impossible. The epigraphical analysis only complicates the issue. John Gibson claimed that we were dealing with the Hebrew adapting the Phoenician letters for the purpose of the Hebrew language notation[17]. Whereas Ada Yardeni considered *the Calendar* to be an example of the Phoenician script used in Palestine and Transjordan until the eighth century BC.[18] At times various scholars suggest that *the Calendar* should be dated to the ninth century BC. However, the shape of certain letters, *zāyin*, *mēm* and *sāmeḵ* in particular, is similar to the letters of the Tel Zaiyt *alphabet*. Therefore dating *the Calendar* to the tenth century BC (the latter half) seems perfectly correct to me.

Summary

As clearly indicated by the discussion presented hereinabove the modern epigraphy is in possession of a small amount of the research material pertaining to the early Hebrew inscriptions. The presently known material does not allow us to draw consistent conclusions,

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[16] S. Galil, *"yyn ḥlq". The Oldest Hebrew Inscription from Jerusalem*, „Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society" 31/2013, pp. 11-26.

[17] J.C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 1, *Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions*, Oxford 1971, p. 11.

[18] A. Yardeni, *The Book of Hebrew Script*, Jerusalem 1997, p. 15.

quite the contrary – it generates numerous and conflicting hypotheses. The fact which is rather certain is the lack of one consistent direction of notation before the year 1000 BC. Inscriptions were written from left to right and in the opposite direction (and prior to that, in Sinai, even from top to bottom). There was also no established uniform shape of letters and their arrangement in *texts*. The inscriptions from Chirbet Qeiyafa exemplify great liberty in this regard. This, in turn, influences the freedom in deciphering the letters of the inscriptions and their interpretation. However, it would seem that a certain shift occurred after the year 1000 BC. The direction of writing was settled (*classical*, from right to left) and the shapes of letters were largely standardised. The available material allows us to ascertain that the process of standardisation occurred in Phoenician Byblos (Gebal) and was probably adopted by other people of Canaan. It is impossible to determine when the *national* Hebrew script was developed. It is so because it is difficult to develop a theory on the grounds of the scarce evidence which is *de facto* limited to *the Gezer Calendar*.

Despite these difficulties the epigraphical research of the inscriptions from the territory of Canaan is developing with increasing intensity and enriches the ascertainments and estimations of historians and archeologists.

The Oldest Hebrew Alphabetic Inscriptions (The Epigraphical Analysis)

Summary

Contemporarily the academia has six of the oldest Hebrew alphabetic inscriptions: ostracon from ’Izbet Ṣartah (about 1200 BC), inscription from Tel Zayit (/ 11th / half of 10th century BC), ostracon from Chirbet Qeiyafa (decline 11th – the first half of 10th century BC – reign of Saul); *a new* inscription from Chirbet Qeiyafa (dated as the previous one); new ostracon form Ophel, Jerusalem (11th or half of 10th BC – reign of Solomon, it is also the oldest Hebrew inscription from the area of Jerusalem); *Gezer Calendar* (second half of 10th BC – reign of Solomon or the first half of the ninth century BC). This article discusses the contemporary state of research on early Hebrew inscriptions. It also presents the author’s own findings and related issues on ancient Hebrew epigraphic.

Keywords: History, Writing, Alphabet, Palaeography, Epigraphy

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