

DOES A RECENTLY PUBLISHED PALEO-HEBREW INSCRIPTION
REFER TO THE SOLOMONIC TEMPLE?

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*1. Introduction*¹

In November 1997 reports appeared in the press about a recently emerged paleo-Hebrew inscription that would confirm the existence of the temple of Solomon. A king Ashyahu, unknown from the Old Testament, would have offered three shekels of silver to the בית יהוה, 'the temple of YHWH'. The inscription would date about a 100 or 150 years after the Solomonic era. The reports in the press could be traced back to a paper in a popular scientific American journal.² There, the publication is referred to of two paleo-Hebrew inscriptions from the collection of Sh. Mousaïeff at London.³ The circumstances of the excavation of both ostraca are unknown. This implies that we do not know where and when the ostraca were found. Archaeological and stratigraphic data are absent that could help dating the texts. This situation immediately calls into question the authenticity of the findings. An investigation of the ink used in the inscriptions, however, made an end to all doubts.⁴ Moreover, the contents of the inscriptions assume such a high level of knowledge of Ancient Israel and Classical Hebrew that a forgery should be excluded. In this article I will present my reading of the first inscription. In doing so, I will try to investigate the validity of the claim that this Classical Hebrew text can be taken as evidence for the existence of the Solomonic temple.

2. Text and Translation

A first look at the paleography of the inscription makes clear that the claim that this text was written 100 to 150 years after the construction of the Solomonic temple, is difficult to defend. In my view the paleographic evidence tallies a seventh century BCE date for the inscription. A

¹Paper read at a meeting of the research groups for Biblical and Judaic studies of the Faculty of Theology and the Catholic Theological University at Utrecht, 19 January 1998. I would like to thank my colleagues for the stimulating remarks.

²H. Shanks, 'Three Shekels for the Lord: Ancient Inscription Records Gift to Solomon's Temple', *Biblical Archeologist Review* 23 issue 6 (1997), 28-32.

³P. Bordreuil, F. Israel & D. Pardee, 'Deux ostraca paléo-hébreux de la collection Sh. Mousaïeff', *Semitica* 46 (1996), 49-76 + Planches 7 et 8.

⁴See Bordreuil, Israel & Pardee, 'Deux ostraca', 75-76.

thorough analysis of the evidence, however, is wanting. To test the validity of the claim that the inscription would refer to the Solomonic temple, I will first present the inscription with a translation:

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| 1. Thus has ordered you Ashya- | 1. כאשר.צוך.אשי |
| 2. hu, the king: It has to be given in the hand of | 2. הו.המלך.לתת.ביד |
| 3. [Z]echariah, silver from Tar- | 3. [ז]כריהו.כסף.תר |
| 4. shish for the house of YHWH, | 4. שש.לבית.יהוה |
| 5. 3 s(hekels). | 5. ש /// |

The text as such is easy to understand. Yet it raises some questions that will be dealt with shortly.

3. Remarks to the text

Line 1

According to the editors the first word preserved would suggest that the original beginning of the text has been lost.⁵ The Hebrew word כאשר, 'like; such as', indeed commonly indicates the beginning of an apodosis. Lang, however, has convincingly made clear that כאשר can stand at the beginning of a Hebrew sentence.⁶ The word then should be construed as 'Thus', or the like, and has a kataphoric function.⁷ The lines 2b-5 then contains the commission of Ashyahu and a discussion of the contents of a broken off part of the inscription is unnecessary.

The identity of Ashyahu is enigmatic. The name as such is not attested in the Old Testament. It does, however, occur on an ostracon from Arad from the beginning of the sixth century BCE.⁸ This Ashyahu is the father of Elyashib who played an important role in the local administration of Arad around 600 BCE. According to Lemaire the name Ashyahu would appear on one of the Lakish-ostraca dating around the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.⁹ The

⁵Bordreuil, Israel & Pardee, 'Deux ostraca', 50.

⁶B. Lang, 'The Decalogue in the Light of a Newly Published Palaeo-Hebrew Inscription (Hebrew Ostrakon Mousaïeff No. 1)', *JSOT* 77 (1998), 21-25. I do not agree with Lang's conclusions concerning the interpretation of some clauses in the Decalogue, since they are speculative and make the impression of being unsoundly grounded in grammar.

⁷On the idea of kataphoric elements in Classical Hebrew see basically W. Schneider, *Grammatik des Biblischen Hebräisch: Ein Lehrbuch*, München 1985, § 52.6.

⁸Arad 17:3; see J. Renz & W. Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik* I/1, Darmstadt 1995, 380-382.

⁹A. Lemaire, *Inscriptions hébraïques I: Les ostraca*, Paris 1977, 245.

inscription on this ostrakon, however, is not very well legible.¹⁰ The name Ashyahu probably means ‘YHWH has given’ or ‘Gift of YHWH’¹¹ and can be construed as an expression of the faith of his parents.

As for the identity of Ashyahu a complicating factor is the apposition *המלך*, ‘the king’, in the inscription. No royal ruler by the name of Ashyahu is known from the Old Testament or from the inscriptions. There are several proposals to solve this riddle.

(1) The first solution is based on the idea that at the end of the first line a few letters were broken away: *ההיXX בן XX* אש, ‘Ash[... the son of ...]yahu’. The element אש then would be the beginning of the name of an Israelite or Judaeen prince. This, as such, attractive proposal has been rejected already by the editors since the next lines in the inscription do fit very well and there is ground for the suggestion that lines 1 and 2 in their present form would not fit.¹²

(2) The second solution is based on the idea that Ashyahu has been a Judaeen or Israelite king whose name is presented here in an alternative orthography. The name then would be an inverted form of the royal name Joash.¹³ In the Hebrew Bible there is one very telling example of inversion of the order subject-verb into verb-subject in the orthography of the name of a Judaeen king: The name of king Jehoiachin (2 Kgs. 24:6.8.12.15; 25:27; Jer. 52:31; Ezek. 1:2; 2 Chron. 36:8.9) is also written Jechoniah (e.g. Jer. 24:1; 27:20) or Coniah (Jer. 22:24, 28; 37:1).¹⁴ It is, however, debated whether this was an official usage. It can be assumed that Jeremiah, or the Jeremaic tradition, inverted the order of the name mockingly. But even if it was an official possibility to refer to a king by inverting the order of his name, then אשיהו, ‘Ashyahu’, would be an inversion of יהואש, ‘Joash’. In the Hebrew Bible two kings by the name of Joash are known. (1) Joash, the king of Judah (2 Kgs. 11:21-12:21) and (2) Joash, the king of Israel (2 Kgs. 13:10-13) who came to power in the thirty-seventh year of Joash, the king of Judah. An identification with one of these two kings would imply a late ninth century BCE date for the inscription. The paleography, however, hints at a date in the seventh century BCE.

The editors hinted at the possibility that אשיהו, ‘Ashyahu’, would be a variant for יאשיהו,

¹⁰See Renz & Röllig, *Handbuch I/1*, 433.

¹¹See e.g. R. Zadok, *The Pre-hellenistic Israelite Anthroponomy and Prosopography* (OLA 28) Leuven 1988, s.v.; Renz & Röllig, *Handbuch II/1.2*, 61; Bordreuil, Israel & Pardee, ‘Deux ostraca’, 51.

¹²Bordreuil, Israel & Pardee, ‘Deux ostraca’, 51.

¹³See Bordreuil, Israel & Pardee, ‘Deux ostraca’, 50-51; Shanks, ‘Three Shekels’, 31; Lang, ‘Decalogue’, 22.

¹⁴See e.g. J.M. Berridge, ‘Jehoiachin’, *ABD 3*, 661-63.

the name of the Judaeen king Josiah.¹⁵ This identification would tally with the paleographic data. The name Josiah, however, is consistently written with a *yiqtol* verb form, ישי, and never with a *qatal* verb form or a nominal form as is the case in אשרי. This observation makes the identification of Ashyahu with Josiah problematic.

(3) The third identification is based on the idea that the Hebrew noun מלך could have a broader specter of meaning than only 'royal ruler'. Although neither in the Hebrew Bible nor in the inscriptions from ancient Palestine the noun מלך is attested with the meaning 'local ruler; governor'—in fact the word ר is used to denote that position¹⁶—the possibility that Ashyahu has been a local ruler over one of the Judaeen 'provinces' cannot be excluded beforehand. In a communication on the ANE-list, George Athas from Sydney has offered the identification of Ashyahu from this inscription with the Ashyahu from the Arad ostracon.¹⁷ In the Arad-ostraca, Elyashib, the son of Ashyahu, is called 'my lord'. This brought Athas to the assumption that Ashyahu has been a ruler over the city-state of Arad and that Elyashib has been the crown-prince. The ostraca from Arad in which Elyashib plays a prominent role, date around 600 BCE. This implies that Ashyahu would have been the local ruler during the reign of Josiah. In my view, Athas wants too much. He overlooks the fact that during the reign of Josiah a centralization of cult and power took place. Moreover, data on a (semi-)autonomous city-state in Arad are absent.

(4) All identifications so far are based on the assumption that Ashyahu has been a Judaeen or an Israelite. This assumption is understandable since (a) the inscription is written in Hebrew; (b) Ashyahu is a personal name with a yahwistic theophoric element and (c) the dedication is to the temple of YHWH. The assumption is, however, not necessary. One can speculate on the idea that Ashyahu has been a non-Israelite king. It can, for instance, not be excluded beforehand that he was a ruler over one of the Philistine city-states. The following remarks are not meant as a proof for this option, but want to show that is not completely nonsensical. (a) The script of the inscription under consideration reminds one of the script of the royal dedicatory inscription found in Ekron in 1996. That inscription makes clear that in ancient Ekron a language was written close to Hebrew.¹⁸ Noort has questioned the once traditional view that the Philistines

¹⁵Bordreuil, Israel & Pardee, 'Deux ostraca', 52; see also Lang, 'Decalogue', 22.

¹⁶See e.g. U. Rüterwörden, *Die Beamten der israelitischen Königszeit* (BWANT 117), Stuttgart 1984, 20-63.

¹⁷The ANE-list is a public platform for discussion on topics related to the ancient Near East accessible to users of E-mail.

¹⁸See S. Gitin, T. Dothan & J. Naveh, 'A Royal Dedicatory Inscription from Ekron', *Israel Exploration Journal* 47 (1997), 1-16.

should be seen as descendants of people moving to the Levant from the Aegean area. They rather should be construed as a mixture of local groups, related to the Sea-People, and indigenous Canaanites.¹⁹ The veneration of YHWH might have been an element in Canaanite religion.²⁰ What is more, a Philistine king could have adopted the YHWH-religion.

All solutions mentioned are characterized by a mixture of weak and strong points. The only possible conclusion to be made is that a decision on the identity of Ashyahu cannot be made on the basis of the evidence available.

A final remark on the interpretation of line 2 regards the infinitive construct לנה. With Lang²¹ this form should be construed as having gerundive force.

Line 3

‘[Z]echariah’ is a common Israelite name that occurs some 50 times in the Old Testament, in ancient Hebrew inscriptions and in the texts from Qumran. Depending on the identification of Ashyahu, Zechariah could be identified with a character known from the Hebrew Bible or the inscriptions. The editors offered two possibilities: 2 Chron. 24:20 mentioned a Zechariah who full of the spirit of God, nevertheless was murdered by his uncle Joash; 2 Chron. 35:8 mentions a Levite Zechariah who was ‘over the house of God’ during the reign of king Josiah.²² Looked away from the question whether details related in Chronicles that are not mentioned in the Book of Kings are historically reliable, the identifications proposed cannot be seen other than assumptions. In the inscription under consideration Zechariah is cast in the role of a financial officer or a priest at the sanctuary.

‘Silver from Tarshish’. The location of Tarshish is unclear.²³ Although the Phoenician Nora-inscription refers to a Tarshish on Sardinia²⁴, Tarshish in Spain is more probable. At the banks of the Guadalquivir River a Phoenician colony had been established. Both areas, Sar-

¹⁹E. Noort, *Die Seevölker in Palästina* (Palestina Antiqua 8), Kampen, 27-112.

²⁰See e.g. M. Dijkstra, ‘Yahweh, El and their Asherah. On Continuity and Discontinuity in Canaanite and Ancient Israelite Religion’, in: M. Dietrich & O. Loretz (eds.), *Ugarit - Ein ostmediterranes Kulturzentrum im Alten Orient. Ergebnisse und Perspektiven der Forschung Band I. Ugarit und seine altorientalische Umwelt* (ALASP 7) Münster 1995, 41-73.

²¹Lang, ‘Decalogue’, 22.

²²Bordreuil, Israel & Pardee, ‘Deux ostraca’, 53; Lang, ‘Decalogue’, 22.

²³See Bordreuil, Israel & Pardee, ‘Deux ostraca’, 53-55; With the literature mentioned by them.

²⁴H. Donner & W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Wiesbaden 1973, No. 46.

dinia and South West Spain, were known in antiquity for their fine metals and mineral deposits.²⁵ The expression 'beaten silver from Tarshish' in Jer. 10:9, a textual unit in which divine images are mocked, underscores the view that 'silver from Tarshish' was of a proverbial high quality.

Line 4

'The House of YHWH'. In the inscription under consideration reference is made to a gift for the 'temple of YHWH'. In the Old Testament the expression בית יהוה more than often²⁶ refers to the temple in Jerusalem be it the Solomonic sanctuary or the Second Temple. This is also the case in reports on Joash (2 Kgs. 15:5f) and Josiah (2 Kgs. 22:3ff). The expression is also attested on the ostrakon from Arad (6):18:9.²⁷ This inscription does not refer to a local sanctuary, but to the temple in Jerusalem since the letter under consideration was written after the cult centralization under Josiah and the temple at Arad had been destroyed after Stratum VII. Other written sources mentioning a 'sanctuary for YHWH' are absent.²⁸ This linguistic evidence, however, does not exclude the possibility that in ancient Israel local shrines and sanctuaries could have been indicated as בית יהוה. It should be kept in mind that the text of the Hebrew Bible is strongly biased by a pro-Jerusalem point of view.

Archaeological excavations have unearthed the remains of a variety of sanctuaries from Iron Age Palestine. Some of them were located in Philistine areas²⁹, others in Edomite territory³⁰ and some in Judah.³¹ This implies that even in the seventh century BCE sanctuaries other than the Solomonic temple could have been indicated by the expression בית יהוה.

²⁵Spain: Strabo, *Geog.* 3.2.11; Sardinia: *KAI* 46.

²⁶See the outline in D.J.A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* II, Sheffield 1995. 154.

²⁷See Renz & Röllig, *Handbuch* I/1, 384.

²⁸Shanks, 'Three Shekels', 29, refers to the inscription on an ivory pomegranate that emerged in the antiquity-market some years ago: ביתו [יהוה] קרש כדנם; see Renz & Röllig, *Handbuch* I/1, 192-193. The supposed reading, however, is open for debate.

²⁹E.g. Tel Ashdod; eighth century BCE; see M. Dothan & D.N. Freedman, *Ashdod I. The First Season of Excavations* (Atiqot, English Series 7), Jerusalem 1967, 132-139.

³⁰E.g. Horvat Qitmit; seventh-sixth century BCE; see I. Beit-Arieh, 'New Light on the Edomites', *Biblical Archaeology Review* 14.2 (1988), 28-41; Idem, 'The Edomite Shrine at Horvat Qitmit in the Judean Negev, Preliminary Excavation Report', *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991), 93-116; and Ein Hazeva; seventh-sixth century BCE; see R. Cohen & Y. Yisrael, 'En Hazeva - 1990-1994', *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 15 (1996), 114-116.

³¹E.g. Tel Batash; seventh century BCE; see G.L. Kelm & A. Mazar, *Timnah. A Biblical City in the Sorek Valley*, Winona Lake 1995, 85:C26.152.

Line 5

As in the Arad ostraca, numbers are written in hieratic script.³²

These observations yield the following translation:

Thus has Ashyahu, the king, ordered you: in the hands of [Z]echariah silver from Tarshish should be given for the sanctuary of YHWH; three shekels.

2.3. Conclusion

Although much remains unclear, the 'House of the LORD'-inscription is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of ancient Hebrew inscriptions. As long as the identity of 'Ashyahu, the king' is under discussion, the identity of the sanctuary benefited with three shekels of high quality silver cannot be settled. The view that this inscription produces the incontestable proof of the existence of the Solomonic temple is based on an interpretation of the royal name as referring to an Israelite or Judaeic king.

³²See Lemaire, *Inscriptions Hébraïques*, 277-281.