

# Blessing in Text and Picture in Israel and the Levant

## || A Comparative Case Study on the Representation of Blessing in H̱irbet el-Qom and on the Stela of Yehiawmilk of Byblos\* ; U

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The present article has three issues as its focal point: Thematically, it is dominated by the topic of blessing, methodically, the appropriate relation of text and picture, and with respect to sources, the relevance of so-called primary sources is concerned. Since these issues are – more or less vehemently – debated in current research, I shall concentrate my investigations on them, trying to contribute some arguments towards a clarification. The approach chosen, however, is not a general one but an exemplary one: I shall elaborate a comparative case study on the textual (or epigraphic) and pictorial (or iconographic) representation of blessing in the primary sources from H̱irbet el-Qom and on the stela of Yeẖawmilk of Byblos.

The selection of this exemplary set of two blessing-artefacts from the Levant of the 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium BCE is based mainly on two reasons: (1) First, it allows for a concrete and specific description of two representations of the blessing-phenomenon that sets them off beyond general stereotypes. At the same time, the localisation of the artefacts in time and space enables a comparison that seems worthwhile: On the one hand, the two artefacts reflect the ‘international’ distribution of the blessing topic; on the other hand, both concepts of blessing belong to the Levantine area of the 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium BCE which, generally speaking, in many respects forms a cultural entity. Hence, two different basic-constellations of blessing in their respective religious symbol system are perceivable, that – in a long-term and ‘trans-national’ perspective – can be described and compared. Of course, this comparison gains much of its quality from the fact that both artefacts are composed of text and picture. (2)

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\* The following study was written at the Warburg Institute, London, where I enjoyed the privilege of spending several months during 2006 as a Henri Frankfort fellow; parts of earlier drafts have been presented there and at the SBL Annual Meeting in Washington. That it is concerned to a considerable extent with the relevance of pictures or iconographic constellations seems not inappropriate at a place founded by Aby M. Warburg, one of the originators of the (later so-called) iconic turn (cf. only Gombrich, *Aby* 312-317; Didi-Huberman, *Préface*; Michaud, *Aby*, esp. 73-77.238-239).



Consequently, an adequate analysis of these blessing-topics is impossible without also discussing the methodical problem mentioned before, i.e. the problem of relating textual / epigraphic and pictorial / iconographic categories, and the implications for the relevance of primary sources.

Therefore, the following disposition seems appropriate: Subsequent to a short introduction into the theme, method and sources (1), I shall describe, analyse and interpret the representations of blessing on the two artefacts (2) and on this basis, elaborate a comparison of their blessing-constellations in text and picture (3). This leads to some conclusions in general that summarise the most important insights, and to a few specific perspectives concerning ongoing blessing-research (4).

## 1. Introduction: Theme, method, sources

The three issues of theme, method and sources merging into the two artefacts mentioned shall shortly be introduced so the purpose of the following analysis may be more precisely defined.

### 1.1. Theme

The theme of blessing in Ancient Israel and the Levant (as well as the Ancient Near East in general) has attracted more interest in the last one or two decades,<sup>1</sup> and justly so, blessing being an international and widespread phenomenon of primary religion in the Ancient Near East. Thus, blessing plays or should play a distinct role in biblical anthropology, addressing the fundamental question of a good and fortunate life, in which today's more popular question of human existence only reaches its climax.

The concept of blessing in Ancient Israel and the Levant<sup>2</sup> essentially consists in a *772-basic constellation* in which man or deities as subjects<sup>3</sup> – in a situation of encounter (Begegnungssituation), often combining utterance und action – bless or bestow blessing as life securing and increasing welfare-strength

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of the history of research, see my Habilitation on 'Blessing and Theologies of Blessing in Ancient Israel' (Leuenberger, Segen 45-64 [Lit.]), where I focus – against the background of the Ancient Near East – on the religious- and theological-historical constellations and transformations as they appear in extra-biblical and biblical, i.e. primary and secondary, sources that have come down to us.

<sup>2</sup> For the following, see more detailed Leuenberger, Segen 4-11 (Lit.); and for the newer discussion esp. Mitchell, Meaning; Crawford, Blessing; Frettlöh, Theologie; and recently Aitken, Semantics.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of the participle Qal (passive), which occurs e.g. in H̱irbet el-Qom, the (formal) object is missing due to syntactical reasons, so that it is the formal subject who receives blessing.



(to) human or divine or (seldom) even tangible objects. Against the background of the (varying) linguistic usage in modern languages (e.g. English ‘bless’, French ‘bénir’, Italian ‘benedire’ or Spanish ‘bendecir’), the reciprocity of בָּרַךְ – signifying man blessing deity as well as deity blessing man – is particularly noteworthy and interesting. Thereby, verbal clauses accentuate (esp. in the Pi‘el) the process of blessing, while nominal constructions emphasise the established status or content; in between them stand the participle forms, whose sense varies according to context. Independent thereof, the basic constellation of בָּרַךְ as a whole forms a concept of securing and increasing life par excellence. In detail, this constellation can be specified by aspects such as form, situation or setting in life (‘Sitz im Leben’) and function, content, blessing-process, blessing-mediation (between god and man), blessing-execution (word / act), (un)conditionality, argumentative structure, blessing-curse-alternative and similar aspects. Overall, this basic constellation of בָּרַךְ can be depicted as follows:

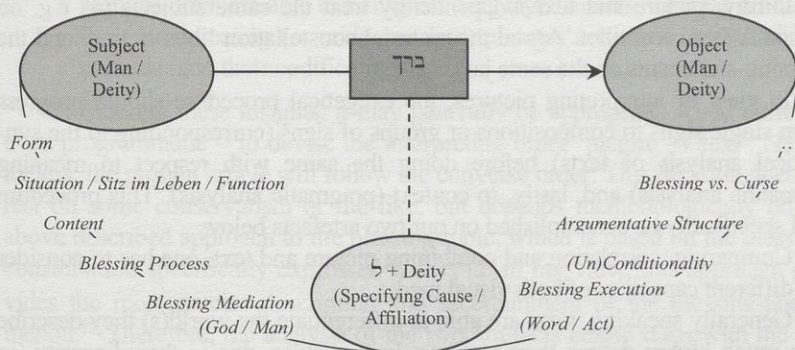


Fig. 1: Basic Constellation of בָּרַךְ

## 1.2 Method

Referring to method, the ongoing visualisation of the world in which we live, combined with the growing amount of archaeological artefacts from Ancient Israel (as well as the Ancient Near East) during the last 60 years (of which only a very small percentage actually contain inscriptions) has now widely begun to affect the methods pursued in religious-historical research on Ancient Israel: Since there existed – beside texts – pictures and images in Ancient Israel,<sup>4</sup> they eventually deserve their right to be seen.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, ana-

<sup>4</sup> That has, at the latest, reached general acceptance since the works of Schroer, Israel, (overlooking a broad spectrum of non-textual primary sources) and Berlejung, Theologie, (concentrating on images of deities in Israel and the Ancient Near East).



lysing and clarifying the relations of text and picture in artefacts containing *both* categories of signs, constitutes a test-case of paradigmatic interest (whose results in a broader context might be significant for clarifying the relation of cultural textual and non-textual artefacts).

Methodologically, the relation of picture and text would have to be treated in detail.<sup>6</sup> In the present context of two selected artefacts combining picture and text, however, it is sufficient to note that in an obvious first step the layers of picture and text have to be approached separately to develop an independent understanding of both dimensions. Only then, in a second (respectively third) step, can they then be compared and correlated with each other, leading to a (possibly consistent) overall interpretation.

In so doing, principally three types of relation between picture and text are possible:<sup>7</sup> (1) First and relatively seldom, texts describe pictures (as e.g. in Ezek 23:14-15), or contrariwise pictures illustrate texts. (2) Secondly, picture and text implicitly refer to each other (as in the cases analysed below or as in Is 6). (3) Or thirdly, picture and text independently treat the same subjects (as e.g. on Pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ağrud the pictorial constellation 'ibex at tree' and the blessing-statements on the same jar).

In view of interpreting pictures, the exegetical procedure should progress from single signs to compositions or groups of signs (corresponding to the syntactical analysis of texts) before doing the same with respect to meaning (semantic analysis) and, lastly, to context (pragmatic analysis). This procedure will specifically be accomplished on our two artefacts below.

Comparing, correlating and combining picture and text, one has to consider the different capacities of both visual media:

Generally speaking, texts are able to differentiate the world(s) they describe in a much higher degree than pictures. In particular, due to their linearity (in opposition to the scenic constellations of pictures), they can handle a principally unlimited amount of information, as shown by inscriptions, annals, law corpora, myths and epics. In contrast, the characteristics of pictures comprise:<sup>8</sup>

- an aesthetic visualisation of the world: We respond, for example, to the picture of a so-called 'composite tree' in a more immediate way than to the term 'composite tree';

<sup>5</sup> So programmatically Keel, *Recht*.

<sup>6</sup> See thereto my preparative remarks: Leuenberger, *Segen* 66-74.

<sup>7</sup> So critically following Keel, *Iconography* 358; see also Schroer, *Ikongraphie* 220; cf. as well Leuenberger, *Segen* 73 with note 280-281.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. further Nöth, *Handbuch* 476-477.481-486; Scholz, *Bild* 135-136; Schelske, *Be-deutung* 71-84.



- a scenic but also simultaneous depiction of complex constellations: Pictures allow for (and at the same time often perform) an extremely ‘thick description’ of ‘culture’ or ‘world’,<sup>9</sup> which indeed separates them from language and texts. For instance, one simple picture may symbolise the whole cosmos, whereas interpretations of this picture fill several volumes;
- a multi-perspectivity that unifies complex and multipolar relations. By contrast, the famous “multiplicity of approaches”<sup>10</sup> often referred to, always presupposes a linear sequence;
- a depiction of functions and roles inherent to certain objects (whereupon instructive transfers or integrations as well as overlappings or diffusions are traceable);<sup>11</sup>
- a reduction of complexity of the world that pictures share with texts (and any symbolisations);
- a comprehensibility transgressing languages: As opposed to texts, pictures often are able to transgress language barriers, whereas problems in communicating (or understanding) pictures arise from boundaries of cultures (and their codifications).

Considering these insights, it may generally be appropriate – and currently even programmatic – to devise the interpreting order ‘picture → text’. Nevertheless, the present article will follow the converse order: This decision does not rest on some conservatism or the like, but depends methodologically on the above described approach to the blessing-topic, which is based on the blessing-constellation specifically expressed with בָּרַךְ. In my view, this approach provides the most precise description and ascertainment of the blessing-phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the analysis of the two artefacts below starts with the textual layer, which allows for a concrete description of the blessing-constellations on hand, followed by the pictorial layer, which is moulded by the characteristics just mentioned.

### 1.3 Sources

Relating to sources in general and with respect to religious-historical investigations on Ancient Israel and the Levant, the framework adumbrated above pleads for a valorisation of primary sources, where they are available and inter-

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Geertz, Description 3-30.

<sup>10</sup> So Frankfort, Religion 4.

<sup>11</sup> See for the first using the solar deity from Jerusalem Keel / Uehlinger, Jahwe 301, for the last by means of images of deities and their naming from Palestine of the Late Bronze Age Weippert, Palästina 295-296.

<sup>12</sup> See the references above in note 2.



pretable. Here, however, concentrating on two selected artefacts of primary sources, it is not necessary to develop these general consequences which affect the status of primary and secondary sources, their relations etc.<sup>13</sup> Rather, the artefacts themselves shall now be analysed.

## 2. Representations of Blessing in Ḥirbet el-Qom and on the Stela of Yehawmilk of Byblos

The textual and pictorial representations of Blessing in Ḥirbet el-Qom and on the stela of Yehawmilk of Byblos will now be investigated according to their appearance on the material artefacts, focusing – as introduced above – first on the text (epigraphic layer), secondly on the picture (iconographic layer) and thirdly on the combination of both (overall composition).

### 2.1 Ḥirbet el-Qom (Qom 3)

In a 1967 campaign directed by William G. Dever, two tomb-systems were discovered in Ḥirbet el-Qom, located 14 km to the west of Hebron. They contained, among other remains, three inscriptions that paleographically date from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>14</sup> Whereas the first two short inscriptions name and present the respective owner of the tomb, the third one (Qom 3) is the longest and best preserved exemplar, measuring 40 x 51 cm. It originates from the wall between chambers 1 and 2 of tomb 2, which is an arcosolium typical for Iron Age IIB-C.<sup>15</sup> The interesting and outstanding thing in the context of blessing-inscriptions from Ancient Israel (notably compared with the Pithoi from Kuntillet ‘Aḡrud etc.)<sup>16</sup> is that only here we have documented *a blessing-artefact that combines text and picture* – despite the fact that the pictorial depiction in this case encloses only one element or motive: the hand.

<sup>13</sup> See hereto Leuenberger, Segen 75-77; the textual primary sources are also included by Aitken, Semantics 4.23.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Dever, Iron Age 164-165; Lemaire, Inscriptions 602-603; Renz, HAE 1 199-217; probably also in this context belong some inscribed ceramics (dated in the 8<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century BCE), deriving from illicit excavations (see Renz, HAE 1 211-217; Dobbs-Allsopp a.o., Inscriptions 414-419).

<sup>15</sup> See the maps by Dever, Iron Age 147-148.

<sup>16</sup> To the pertinent Old Hebrew blessing-inscriptions see detailed Leuenberger, Segen 113-178.



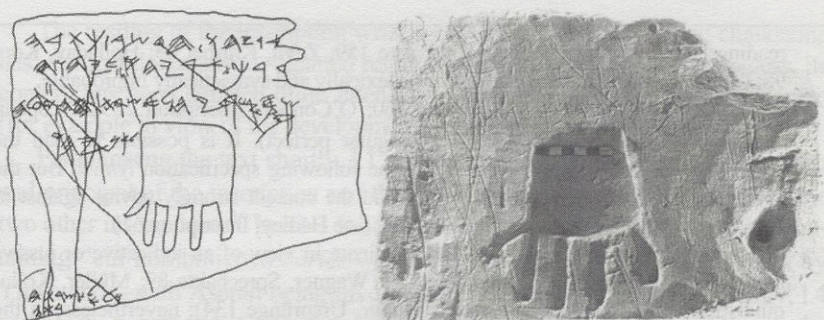


Fig. 2: Drawing and Photography of the Blessing-Artifact from Hirbet el-Qom<sup>17</sup>

### 2.1.1 The Blessing-Inscription

The inscription on the artefact from Hirbet el-Qom (Qom 3) runs as follows:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 'ryhw · h <sup>š</sup> r <sup>18</sup> · ktbh <sup>19</sup>                                  | (3:1) Uriyahu, the rich, (wrote it / )had it written:  |
| brk <sup>20</sup> · 'ryhw · lyhwh  | (2) Blessed is / be Uriyahu by Yhwh.                   |
| wm <sup>š</sup> ryh <sup>21</sup> · l' <sup>š</sup> rth <sup>22</sup> · hws <sup>23</sup> lh | (3) And from his enemies – by his Ašerah he saved him. |
| l' <sup>š</sup> nyhw   | (4) By Oniyahu.  |

<sup>17</sup> The drawing is taken from Hadley, Khirbet 52, the photography, which is very well exposed, from Ahituv, Handbook 113.

<sup>18</sup> So now mostly (e.g. Keel / Uehlinger, Gods 237; Hadley, Khirbet 51; Hadley, Cult, 86; Renz, HAE 1 207; TUAT 2 / 4, 557 [D. Conrad]); the ' is partially readable, excluding an omission (*hšr*: 'the servant / governor' [Ahituv, Handbook 111; Naveh, Graffiti 28; Dever, Qôm 1234]; *hšr*: 'the singer' [Mittmann, Grabinschrift 141]) or a reinterpretation (*hqšb*: 'be careful' [Dever, Iron Age 159-160; IR, 63.143 [R. Hestrin], with conjecture of the final *r*]; *hqšr*: 'has added' [Garbini, Iscrizione 191.193; Catastini, Note 133; Puech, Inscriptions 128]; *h'sr*: 'who' [Shea, Khirbet 110-111]).

This interpretation makes good sense in the interior of a tomb where tomb robbery is (no longer) relevant, and matches well to a person, who could afford such a construction in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

<sup>19</sup> Whether the suffixed *qatal*-form (obviously referring to the following inscription) is a Qal (Hadley, Khirbet 53; Jaroš, Inschrift 33; Müller, Kolloquialsprache 41 note 109; Renz, HAE 1 207 – but in fact with causative meaning) or a Pi'el (Lemaire, Inscriptions 599-602; Stolz, Monotheismus 172; Dobbs-Allsopp a.o., Inscriptions 410) constitutes no relevant semantic difference. For the context and the naming of the author in 1.4 suggest a causative-permissive translation ('had it written') rather than an active one ('wrote it'), even if one assumes a Qal. – In contrast, a substantive



reading ('his inscription': Dever, Iron Age 159; Zevit, Khirbet 43; Holladay, Kom 98; COS 2 179 [McCarter]) is at that time lexically and syntactically improbable.

- 20 Zevit, Khirbet 41.44; Zevit, Religions 360; O'Connor, Inscription 225.229 opt in analogy to KAgr 8-9 for *brkt* (1./2. singular perfect). It is possible to read the photograph in this way, and that fits to the following specification *lyhwh*. But the smaller script, the lacking word divider and the content strongly advise against it; also, new autopsies seem to exclude a final *t* (see Hadley, Inscription 61).

The nominal clause is principally indeterminate in view of an indicative or jussive reading (cf. only Smelik, Dokumente 139; Wagner, Sprechakte 89; Müller, Kolloquialsprache 21; Müller, Segen 6-8; Müller, Ursprünge 134); nevertheless, in the present context, a blessing-wish (in jussive) to the deceased Uriyahu seems preferable (against Mittmann, Grabinschrift 145-146, pleading for an indicative meaning).

- 21 This has been accepted widely (see Davies, Inscriptions 106 and others; for the spectrum of interpretations in 1.3 see the overview by Binger, Asherah 97-100). On the photograph the first *w* as well as the final *h* are visible, eliminating the version *nsry · wl'srth*: '[Yhwh] my guardian and by his Ašerah' (so Naveh, Graffiti 28; Ahituv, Handbook 111; Angerstorfer, Ašerah 9).

Indeed, nearly all letters have been doubly written or have been completed (at what time ever) by 'ghost letters' (1.3 reads: *wmmš[s]rry[ly]hh*) – arguably due to the precarious conditions of light in the tomb. But they certainly do not establish an orthodox correction (against Jaroš, Inschriften 180; Jaroš, Inschrift 34-35).

Completely speculative remain the proposals made by Margalit, Observations 372-373 (he inserts after 1.2: *ky · hsl(h)w · m(kp ·) 'ybyh*: 'For he rescued him from (the hands of) his enemies'), Puech, Inscriptions 128 (he wants to read originally *brk 'ryhw l'srth*: 'Blessed is / be Uriyahu before Ašerah') and Spronk, Afterlife 308 (he pleads for *wmmšr dyh hl' l'srth hws' lh*: 'And from the mistress as much as comes to him over there may He deliver him').

- 22 Lemaire, Inscriptions 599-602; Lemaire, Yahwe's 44 speculates that Ašerah originally had followed *lyhwh* in 1.2 (as on the Kuntillet 'Ağrud Pithoi).

In the concrete context, *l'srth* seems to gain nearly an instrumental meaning ('by / through'); but lexically, it could also give the reason ('because of') or the purpose ('for the sake of') as suggested by Jeremias / Hartenstein, JHWH 116; Liess, Weg 304; Müller, Kolloquialsprache 42-43.

On the endless debate whether Ašerah is to be interpreted as goddess, as the goddess representing cultic pale or as sanctuary / cella, see beside Frevel, Aschera the overviews by McCarter, Aspects 143-149; Loretz, Aschera 98-172; Hadley, Cult 4-37.54-83; Renz, HAE 2/1 91-92; Heide, Personennamen 110-120. In my opinion, the option of the goddess is the most probable one (e.g. with Dever, Ashera 22.30-31; Dever, God, 176-208; Margalit, Meaning 284), which seems to be corroborated by religious-historical circumstances as well as by the letter prescript, relating blessing-wishes to deities. Considering similar cases, this interpretation is not disqualified by the grammatical problem of the possessive suffix, which doubly determines the noun (see convincingly Müller, Kolloquialsprache 27-33; Freedman, Yahweh; Loretz, Aschera 98-101; Schmid, Differenzierungen 23-24; against the reading as double



The reading of the inscription written on soft and heavily flawed chalkstone has – as just documented – gained relatively broad acceptance. Nevertheless, its content has been debated quite intensely in recent religious-historical research (for example in view of the development of monotheism in Ancient Israel).<sup>24</sup>

Paraphrasing the text shortly, l.1 introduces Uriyahu<sup>25</sup> – owner of the tomb and principal of the inscription and the drawing – in a way that is similar to the two other inscriptions.<sup>26</sup> In l.2-3 follows the main content of the inscription containing “ein kombiniertes *bārūk*-Wort”:<sup>27</sup> It describes Uriyahu as blessed by Yhwh and – with Ašerah being involved – saved from his enemies. Finally, l.4 names in a somewhat smaller script Oniyahu as the actual scribe of the inscription (and the drawing), as indicate the text<sup>28</sup> and its position straight to the left of the hand with the same line spacing as between l.2 and l.3.<sup>29</sup> (In con-

feminine ending of the proper noun Ašerata [Zevit, Khirbet 45-46; Angerstorfer, Ašerah 11-16; TUAT 2/4 563 (Conrad)] or as case ending [Tropper, Gottesname 101]).

<sup>23</sup> Third person singular perfect Hif'il (with Renz, HAE 1 210; Hadley, Cult 99-100 and others); morphologically, also an infinitive or imperative Hif'il is conceivable (see Dijkstra, YHWH 33; Zevit, Khirbet 46; Garbini, Iscrizione 192-193), but accepting the reading argued for above, they are eliminated by syntactical reasons.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. e.g. Schmid, Differenzierungen (Lit.; see also the other essays in the same volume).

<sup>25</sup> The name means ‘Yhwh is (my) light’ (see Renz, HAE 2/1 57.60); it is attested several times in late (cf. Renz, Dokumentation ZAH 1999 242.244; Renz, Dokumentation ZAH 2000 109), and is probably genuine despite fitting splendidly to the blessing-situation in a tomb context. (Even so it remains completely unreliable to reconstruct in l.3 with Binger, Asherah 95-96: *wh'ryh*: ‘[and] his light’).

<sup>26</sup> In each case with the structure ‘*l* + personal name’, wherefore Dever, Iron Age 159 wants to add here an *l* as well, which convinces neither syntactically nor with respect to space, and traces are definitely not visible. In fact, *ktbh* in l.1 corresponds well to the declaration of possession [*h*]/*hdr* · *hzh*: ‘(Belonging to Ophay) <is> this tomb chamber’ in Qom 2:3 (see Dobbs-Allsopp a.o., Inscriptions 406) and arguably presents Uriyahu as owner of the tomb.

<sup>27</sup> Mittmann, Grabinschrift 147 (‘a combined *bārūk*-saying’); the combination, however, refers in fact to the tenses and not to the relation of deity and man (as Mittmann thinks).

<sup>28</sup> *l'nyhw* is a postscript, obviously naming the scribe with *l*-auctoris (Dever, Iron Age 164-165; Lemaire, Inscriptions 602; Renz, Handbuch 1 208.211; Hadley, Cult 100-101; Zevit, Religions 361.367; considering Jaroš, Kanaan 62).

<sup>29</sup> Not denying a connection of text and picture in principle (see below 2.3), the continuing text-flow argues against a (syntactically possible) independent inscription (so Mittmann, Grabinschrift 144; Jaroš, Inschrift 35; undecided Hadley, Cult 101).



trast, the spatial distance, the location after l.4, and the content of the fragmentary l.5-6 advise against a continuation of the same inscription).<sup>30</sup>

In the present context, of course, the interest lies primarily on the *constellation of blessing*:

- The *formulaic language* accords with similar inscriptions (for example from Kuntillet ‘Ağrud) and biblical blessing-statements. It follows the structure: ‘*br(w)k* + personal name + *l* + deity’.
- Addressing the *content* of blessing, the main statement occurs in l.2; there, no explicit specification is made, but l.3, which refers to an act of saving, strongly associates the connotation of protection and saving, supported by the burial context (see below). In addition, the introduction of Uriyahu as a prosperous person indicates a material value of blessing, but this aspect is left at the background (especially as the blessing-content is ‘spiritualised’ to a certain amount [see below]).
- The *causer* of blessing is exclusively Yhwh, which is significant in several respects compared with the Israelite context, particularly of the older inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ağrud: (1) The construction with a passive participle eliminates the *human subject* and therewith – corresponding to the modus of wish – the human execution of blessing. (2) Although Yhwh saved Uriyahu during his lifetime by his female parhedra Ašerah, he represents the final agent of saving from enemies,<sup>31</sup> contrary to Kuntillet ‘Ağrud (see KAgr 8:1-2; 9:4-6; 10:1), where Yhwh and his Ašerah constitute an entity of action, here, Ašerah takes only an auxiliary function<sup>32</sup> in the salvation of Uriyahu during his lifetime, and she is completely absent in the (ulterior) blessing of the late Uriyahu referring only to Yhwh. So Ašerah appears syntactically and factually in a distinct subordination to Yhwh, her operational area being strictly limited. (3) Relating to the question of *intermediating blessing*, often virulent in Old Hebrew inscriptions, a concentration on Yhwh as exclusive causer takes place, increasingly suppressing other divine intermediators (i.e. ‘his Ašerah’) as well as human causers uttering magic and performative blessings. (4) Correlating herewith, *Yhwh appears abso-*

<sup>30</sup> L.5 probably reads: *l'šrth* [...]: ‘By his Ašerah [...]’, l.6: *wl'šrth* [...]: ‘And by his Ašerah [...]’ (cf. hereto Renz, HAE 1 211; a new inscription is supposed by Margalit, Observations 371; TUAT 2/4, 558 [Conrad]; see also Wagner, Sprechakte 257; undecided again Hadley, Khirbet 50-51.60).

<sup>31</sup> This formulation recalls saving statements in the Psalter, see e.g. 44:8 (יִשׁוּעַ הִי. + בָּרַךְ + בָּרַךְ); see also 3:3, 8-9; 22:22 etc.

<sup>32</sup> Even understanding Ašerah as the reason or purpose does not change this relation much.



*lutely*, lacking a local specification by a place name. This isolation might be caused by the genre, as a local specification of the deity is always absent in the blessing-formula ‘*brk* + personal name + *l* + deity’,<sup>33</sup> in addition, the context of a private tomb indicates that we face a document of (elevated) private religion<sup>34</sup> rather than one of official state religion.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, this fact – compared with the letter prescripts from Kuntillet ‘Agrud (see KAgr 8-10), probably reflecting (northern) private religion as well – might indicate an ongoing transformation and isolation of Yhwh. In any case, the crucial point is that the unspecified name of Yhwh obviously possesses pragmatic clearness in the communicative situation between Oniyahu, Uriyahu and possibly other persons.

- The *receiver* of Yhwh’s blessing is, of course, the deceased Uriyahu.<sup>36</sup> This fact implies a distinguished *transformation* of the blessing-constellation (against the background of older Hebrew inscriptions): Blessing, at that time usually focused on securing and strengthening life in the here and now,<sup>37</sup> has been relocated to the border of life or even, in actual fact, into the hereafter: the tomb of Uriyahu, i.e. the realm of death.<sup>38</sup> Blessing is thus expanded to the hereafter and has to secure and increase ‘life’ in the ‘other world’ of death. This expansion can be characterised as a ‘spiritualisation’ of blessing insofar as declarations or wishes concerning Uriyahu’s welfare in the realm of death are extrapolated from biographical experiences of saving (see below). Since it happens in an exclusive relation to Yhwh, as Ašerah lacks in the bless-

<sup>33</sup> See Renz, HAE 2/1 29-32; so rightly Keel / Uehlinger, Gods 239. Admittedly however, the extra-biblical material is quite limited: Beside KAgr 3 it contains mainly the letter prescripts from Arad (Ostrakon 16:2-3; 21:2-3; 40:3), dating mostly from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE (with exception of Ostrakon 40).

<sup>34</sup> With Jeremias / Hartenstein, JHWH 116, describing Yhwh as a “persönliche Schutzgottheit des Verstorbenen, deren Obhut dieser sich auch nach seinem Tod empfiehlt”.

<sup>35</sup> Keel / Uehlinger, Gods 239 ponder whether a local specification was superfluous after the destruction of Samaria 722 BCE. But apart from the insecure dating, this argument seems to be too schematic as even such massive changes only gradually affect the theological systems – especially in the Judean Jerusalem, which was not directly involved. In this context, it is interesting to compare the contemporary expression *’lhy · yršlm*: ‘god of Jerusalem’ from Ḥirbet Bet Layy (B Lay 1:2, ca. 700 BCE: see Renz, HAE 1 245-246).

<sup>36</sup> This reference also discerns the blessing-statement from curse formulas in other tomb inscriptions that address future intruders.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. in detail the overview by Frettlöh, Theologie 43-72 (Lit.).

<sup>38</sup> So in accordance with Schroer, Beobachtungen 298; Müller, Kolloquialsprache 40-44; Liess, Weg 302-307.



ing-statement, he obviously exerts (continuous)<sup>39</sup> influence over the reign of death, which no longer stays unrelated to him but becomes part of his sphere of competence. Of course, there still remains a long way to go until Yhwh's sole claim to world and underworld definitely will be established, including further implications on the religious symbol system. But, in my opinion, in Ḥirbet el-Qom a first and important step has been reached: This specific expansion of Yhwh's blessing-activity documents – at least with respect to the individual – one prominent shift in the long-term expansion of Yhwh's sphere of competence in general, which thematically is related to the understanding of life and death in Ancient Israel,<sup>40</sup> therefore being religious-historically of high interest.

- Connected with the arguments above, the *time relations* have to be looked at: It is in dispute whether to relate the main statement in l.2-3 to the past or to the present / future. Several observations argue in favour of the latter: (1) *Brk*, being (also because of analogous formulas) a participle Qal,<sup>41</sup> possesses grammatically a present (respectively no definite) index, and (2) the same holds true for the overall formula-structure '*brk* + personal name + *l* + deity'. (3) Illuminative is also the syntax of l.2-3: In l.2 we obviously have a performative predication in the present, while l.3 retrospectively switches back – in perfect tense (*hwš*': perfect Hif'il) – to an experience of saving during Uriyahu's lifetime. Following the course of the inscription, l.3 continues l.2 and, hence, the sequel with *w* in l.3, giving the reason for the actual blessing-statement of l.2, seems to indicate a causal hypotaxis rather than a mere parataxis.<sup>42</sup> (4) This suggestion is corroborated by all known parallels of genre (see below) as well as (5) by the expansion of Yhwh's sphere of competence unto the

<sup>39</sup> In view of content (the traditional-historical developments would have to be clarified), this feature might be prepared by Yhwh's punctiform (?) intervention (Am 9:2) or his enduring (?) presence in heaven and underworld / sheol (Psa 139:7-8; see also Prov 15:11).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. hereto Leuenberger, Gnade 343-368.

<sup>41</sup> In accordance e.g. with Renz, HAE 1 208; Dobbs-Allsopp a.o., Inscriptions 410-411 (although opting for another interpretation); see also above note 19. – An affirmative conjugation morphologically possible is excluded by the lacking subject and by the adverbial specification *lyhwh*.

<sup>42</sup> Renz, translating paratactically himself, concedes that *w* "durchaus auch Hypotaxe vertreten [kann], so daß relativisch od. kausal zu übersetzen wäre" (Renz, HAE 1 209 note 1; see also Waltke / O'Connor, Introduction 652-653; for a causal sense also Keel / Uehlinger, Gods 239; Müller, Kolloquialsprache 42 with Old Testament references).



realm of death (see above). Therefore, the actual blessing-statement in 1.2 (participle Qal) refers to the present und future.<sup>43</sup>

- Finally, the *location in a tomb site*, i.e. in the private tomb of Uriyahu, confirms this interpretation as it points to the *pragmatic function* of the inscription: With respect to genre, all known Hebrew tomb inscriptions lack a biographical retrospect,<sup>44</sup> on the contrary, they are consequently focused on securing the present and future welfare of the deceased person. Against the possibility of a mere biographical retrospect (which assumedly would have been more detailed and individual) in the context of a tomb inscription, a connection to the present and future welfare of the deceased person clearly deserves preference.<sup>45</sup>

In summary, we can conclude that the wish for the defunct Uriyahu being blessed by Yhwh (alone) in the present und future, extrapolates the biographical experience of Yhwh having saved Uriyahu from his enemies during his lifetime by Ašerah. So, the blessing-constellation in Ḥirbet el-Qom has basically been expanded and relocated to the realm of death, blessing consisting in securing and increasing ‘life’ in the ‘other world’ of death.

<sup>43</sup> So with Jeremias / Hartenstein, JHWH 115; IR 64 (Hestrin) and the exponents referred to in note 45 (differently, assuming a connection to the past Renz, HAE 1 203-204.208; Renz, Beitrag 144; Köckert, Wandlungen 12.28-29; Zevit, Religions 368; Dobbs-Allsopp a.o., Inscriptions 409; restrained Schmidt, Israel’s 137-138; undecided Berlejung, Tod 489).

<sup>44</sup> Notably, this holds true for the Silwan-inscription, the imperatives in the Ḥirbet Bet Layy-inscriptions (if they are indeed tomb inscriptions) requesting Yhwh’s intervention (BLay 2-3), the curse formulas there (BLay 4-7) and – probably representing a different genre – on some stones (see Renz, ZAH 2002 / 2003 180: numbers 1-2) as well as for the analogous blessing-formulas (Renz, Handbuch 1 180-181: numbers 4-8). Therefore, it seems unadvisable to claim with Köckert that “Bitten für den Grabherrn jedoch untypisch sind” (Köckert, Wandlungen 12).

Even the Ešmun‘azar-inscription from Sidon, reaching out beyond the Hebrew parallels and representing the only known biographical retrospect in antique texts from the Levant, uses a short biographical retrospect (1.3.12-13) and the naming of some deeds (1.13-20) in order to secure the tomb in the present and future (1.4-12, 20-22, cf. KAI 1, 3; 2, 19-23; TUAT 2 / 4 590-593 [C. Butterweck]; against Köckert, Wandlungen 12).

(In this context, we can neglect the possible distinction between genuine tomb inscriptions [texts genuinely written for tomb contexts] and inscriptions that were localised in places used as tombs, but not necessarily intended for such contexts.)

<sup>45</sup> So for the most part where the excavation context is taken into account (see e.g. Mittmann, Grabinschrift 147-148; Liess, Weg 305; Janowski, Toten 14-15.31 [in spite of his translation in the past: ‘gesegnet war ...’]; Janowski, Konfliktgespräche 49.230).



### 2.1.2 Interpreting the Hand within the Overall Composition

The picture, i.e. the hand, obviously dominates the overall composition of the artefact: It takes only one look to see that the whole design is centred on the oversized and deeply engraved hand, while the inscription arranged around it appears nearly marginal and somewhat blurred. As mentioned, the characteristic of the picture is that it contains this one sign only. This circumstance allows, on the one side, to shorten the analysis as the single sign is identical with the pictorial composition; on the other side, it precludes clarifying the meaning of the motive by means of the pictorial context of specific motive constellations.

Hence, the interpretation of the hand, already at that time a very popular symbol (see below with note 48), has to concentrate on itself at first, and may then include the context of the artefact as a whole combining text and picture (see below 2.3).

- The broad spectrum of interpreting the *symbol of the hand* has been discussed widely in research, including mainly – on the divine side – an apotropaic function or a representation of God’s benefaction towards people, and – on the human side – an adoration gesture of the prayer or a self-representation of the dead before Yhwh.<sup>46</sup>
- In view of the *frequency* and *pictorial depiction* in general, one can note with Henri Frankfort, “that the peripheral styles of the West frequently show the hand in their designs, along with other motives derived from Mesopotamia”.<sup>47</sup> But the pervasiveness of the motive does not help much, since in Ḥirbet el-Qom we have only the hand (see also below) – indeed in a specific design.
- This concrete *design of the hand* allows to advance the meaning: The slightly splayed fingers of the right inside hand<sup>48</sup> outstretched downwards, exclude a human self-representation or an adoration gesture (of Uriyahu), which in that time and area would iconographically have been depicted with elevated arms.<sup>49</sup> Rather, the characteristically designed

<sup>46</sup> Cf. in detail Mittmann, *Symbol*; Schroer, *Deutung*; Hadley, *Cult* 102-104; see recently Liess, *Weg* 278-285.305-306.

<sup>47</sup> Frankfort, *Cylinder* 179.

<sup>48</sup> Looking at the physiognomy, it seems clear that the angled finger on the left side represents the thumb; however, this leaves open whether we face the back of the (left) hand or the (right) inside hand. On iconographic and textual (OT) grounds, the latter is more probable (see Mittmann, *Symbol* 30-33; Jeremias / Hartenstein, *JHWH* 116; Hadley, *Khirbet* 61; Hadley, *Cult* 102; Liess, *Weg* 306; for the left hand opts Zevit, *Religions* 369).

<sup>49</sup> With Schroer, *Deutung* 192; Renz, *HAE* 1 206 against Mittmann, *Grabinschrift* 150-151 (differently now Mittmann, *Symbol* 43-44); Zevit, *Religions* 369; pondering



hand constitutes a *numinous symbol* of divine power signifying, on the one side, in an apotropaic manner the divine protection (as will be corroborated by the text), and on the other side, positively representing (as again the text will support) the abundance of divine blessing.<sup>50</sup> (However, what kind of contents protection and blessing include can not be deduced or rendered more precisely by means of the picture.)

- The *oversized proportions* of the hand compared to the inscription are highly visible. But at the same time, a methodically stringent interpretation seems to be difficult and will have to be attempted again in the context of the overall composition.

Only along the way, a remark concerning the *postulation of additional picture motives* by B. Margalit<sup>51</sup> may be added. He claims to recognise in the vertical strokes and the semi-circle at the left bottom corner a tree on a hill, and he relates I.5-6 to them. The idea is iconographically consistent, but it definitely requires a bit more of fantasy than Margalit thinks, to accept his interpretation: Hardly two connected lines are really visible, and the depiction can not be completed by means of the known context of the artefact.<sup>52</sup> Further, the massive hand speaks a different iconographic language.

So, the oversized hand dominating the overall composition, in all likelihood expresses both – Yhwh's protection as well as the abundance of his blessing.

### 2.1.3 The Overall Composition: Combination of Text and Picture

The interesting and outstanding thing with the artefact from Ḥirbet el-Qom in the context of Old Hebrew inscriptions is, as already mentioned, that this blessing-inscription combines text and picture. Having separately analysed its textual and pictorial layer, and now having acquired their blessing-constellations in detail, both blessing-constellations can succinctly be compared, corre-

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Jaroš, *Inschriften* 179. – Into the category of oddities falls Shea's suggestion (Khirbet 113-116) to interpret the hand as Oniyahu's signature (which is disproved by the oversized proportions as well as the explicit signature in I.4).

<sup>50</sup> So Müller, *Kolloquialsprache* 41 (beside an apotropaic function; alike Renz, *HAE* 1 206; Mittmann, *Grabinschrift* 43-44); Jeremias / Hartenstein, *JHWH* 116-117 (refusing an apotropaic function); Dever, *God* 133; Liess, *Weg* 306 (see below note 56); see also, particularly including iconographic evidence, Ackroyd, *Hand* 27, and on Phoenician-Punic parallels Schroer, *Deutung* 196-197; Mittmann, *Grabinschrift* 30-42.

<sup>51</sup> *Observations*, 371; cf. in contrast Keel / Uehlinger, *Gods* 239; Dobbs-Allsopp a.o., *Inscriptions* 408-409.

<sup>52</sup> See the photography by Dever, *Iron Age* 196, showing that the squared stone preserves the blessing-depiction on its complete width.



lated and combined with each other, bringing out text and picture consistently integrating an overall interpretation.

Given the arrangement of the dominating picture and the text incised around it, a *connection of text and picture* is undeniable in principle, and to my knowledge, today no one actually does deny it.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to the facts on Pithoi A from Kuntillet 'Ağrud, where the inscription KAgr 8 is written quite ruthlessly over and across the drawing,<sup>54</sup> in Ĥirbet el-Qom, the inscription is arranged around the hand, obviously presupposing it and taking it intentionally into account.

According to the methodical procedure introduced above, the *overall composition of text and picture on our artefact* can be specified as follows:

- *Thematically*, text and picture obviously both deal (negatively) with protection and (positively) with blessing. Corresponding to the different capacities of text and picture (see above 1.2), the textual blessing-constellation specifies the blessing-depiction of the picture: On the one side, the hand's apotropaic function of divine protection can be rendered in the context of the text more precisely as protection against enemies (1.3).<sup>55</sup> On the other side, the textual blessing-constellation (1.2) confirms the pictorial represented abundance of divine blessing,<sup>56</sup> and, additionally, transfers the localisation of blessing in the 'other world' of death upon the pictured hand.
- Concerning the *oversized proportions of the dominant hand*, it is difficult to determine its sense. One could offer any number of speculations, as others have, but in fact, it might be appropriate just to state its dominance ...
- More insight allows perhaps the *spatial organisation of text and picture*: If the inscription is engraved around the existing hand, then the blessing-text would always have presupposed the symbolic potency of the hand

<sup>53</sup> See pars pro toto Mittmann, Grabinschrift 149; Mittmann, Symbol 43-44; Jaroš, Inschrift 32; Liess, Weg 306.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. hereto Leuenberger, Segen 129-133, describing the similar conditions on both Pithoi.

<sup>55</sup> So Stolz, Monotheismus 172; Jaroš, Inschrift 32 (beside self-representation); Schroer, Deutung 192.199; Keel / Uehlinger, Gods 237; Hadley, Khirbet 62; Dobbs-Allsopp a.o., Inscriptions 409; Schmitt, Magie 149-150 (assuming that in the tomb context intruders should have been averted; however, one may ask whether the interior of a tomb is the appropriate place for this ...).

<sup>56</sup> For this reason, and taking into account the design of the hand with the fingers stretched out downwards as well as Psalm-references, Liess, Weg 306 dares even to interpret the hand as "die von oben herab rettend eingreifende rechte Hand Gottes".



and specified its content: The 'brute symbolic power' of the hand receives a focus on protection, saving and blessing by the text. And conversely, the text's central statement gains pictorial substantiation and potency. In my view, this interpretation presents a plausible, even attractive reading – of course, based on a certain amount of subjectivity, which might be discussed but not eliminated.

To sum up our insights so far: The blessing-artefact from Hīrbet el-Qom has indeed turned out to feature a coherent overall composition in which the constellations of blessing in text and picture mutually correspond to and interpret each other: Roughly speaking, *the text specifies the picture, and the picture provides symbolic power to the text*. Further, one of the most characteristic features is that Yahweh's blessing-power is expanded (by the text) into the realm of tomb and the 'other world' of death, constituting an innovative transformation compared with older blessing-inscriptions (particularly from Kuntillet 'Ağrud).

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