

FURTHER LIGHT ON THE BIBLICAL CONNECTION OF THE BETH SHEMESH OSTRACON

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In the Autumn 1987 issue of *AUSS* I presented a brief study of the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon, suggesting a potential biblical connection for it.¹ The particular connection suggested involved the first personal name listed at the top of the obverse of the sherd. The name written there can be read clearly as ${}^c z^{\text{h}}$, vocalized as ${}^c Uzz^{\text{h}}$. The suggestion of that earlier study was that this individual was none other than the biblical Uzzah of 2 Sam 6:3-8, famed for touching the ark of the covenant when he should not have. The only difference between these two names is that the biblical name ends in a weaker laryngeal letter than the name on the ostrakon. The suggestion is that the weakening of this laryngeal occurred in the course of oral transmission between the time when the ostrakon was written and the time when the name was written down in the first edition of what became the biblical text. Alternatively, this difference could be explained by a later scribe leaving one leg off of the *heth* in the course of transmission, thus turning it into the weaker laryngeal *he*. I still hold this connection to be correct and operative. What follows below is further information in support of that connection.

The other part of my previous suggestion on this subject was that the second name on the front side of the sherd, read by E. Puech as ${}^{\text{h}}z$ or ${}^{\text{h}}iuz$,² was related to the biblical name for Uzzah's brother, *Ahiu* (${}^{\text{h}}yw$). The two names were related in this case by the final *zayin* dropping away from the man's original name as found on the ostrakon. This part of the equation made in my previous article I now reject. The name on the ostrakon should be read in a different way, and I now have a different understanding of the nature of this biblical reference.

¹W. H. Shea, "A Potential Biblical Connection for the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon," *AUSS* 25 (1987): 257-266.

²E. Puech, "Origine de l'alphabet," *RB* 93 (1986): 172-175.

1. *Reexamination of the Obverse*

In my earlier study on this text I worked specifically from the line drawing that accompanied Puech's study of it.³ Professor Puech kindly gave me permission to publish his line drawing with my article, for which I was very appreciative. I accepted those readings and did not go back to check them until I recently noted a study by B. E. Colless in *Abr-Nahrain*.⁴ The article presented a comprehensive study of the early linear alphabet and its development, including the corpus of Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions and the early Canaanite linear texts. As such, this study also included Colless's interpretation of the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon.⁵ For the second personal name on the front of the sherd, Colless followed Cross's reading of this name as ²B-Š/Š-K-R, or *ʔAbišekar/ʔAbišekar*.⁶ In particular, it was the final *resh* in this name that led me back to reexamine it, this time from the original photographs.⁷ My re-examination has led me to quite different conclusions about this name.

A Reading of the Text

In the first place, Cross and Colless are correct in reading the last letter in this name as a *resh*, not as a *zayin*, as Puech did. It has a straight vertical leg on the left, but no corresponding vertical leg on the right, which it would need in order to be a *zayin*. This letter does have a large loop for a head, extending to the right from the top of one vertical leg. That identifies this letter as a *resh*. The other letter in this name which is not disputed is the ²*aleph* at the beginning of the name. Thus so far we have an ²*aleph* at the beginning and a *resh* at the end. The two or three letters in between are much more disputed.

³Ibid., p. 173, reprinted on p. 260 of my study referred to in the first note above.

⁴B. E. Colless, "Recent Discoveries Illuminating the Origin of the Alphabet," *Abr-Nahrain* 26 (1988): 30-67.

⁵Colless's treatment of the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon is found on pp. 58, 60-61 of *ibid.*

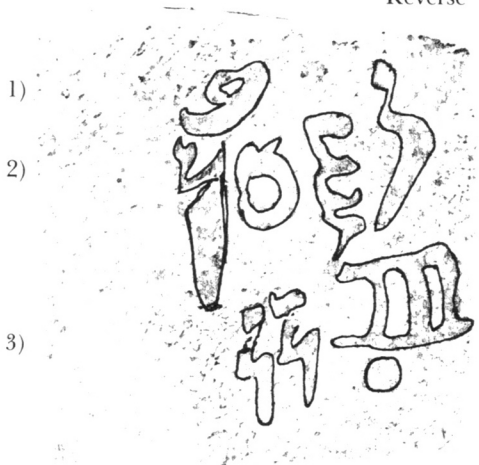
⁶Ibid., p. 61. F. M. Cross, "The Origin and Early Evolution of the Alphabet," *Eretz-Israel* 8 (1967): 17.

⁷The most convenient photographic plate of this sherd for use here has been that which appears on Pl. 40 of G. R. Driver's *Semitic Writing: From Pictograph to Alphabet*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy, 1944 (London: Oxford University Press, 1948). In the third edition of this work (published in 1976) the photograph of this sherd appears on Pl. 42.

Obverse



Reverse



The second letter in this name has been read by Puech as a *heth* and by Cross and Colless as a *beth*. It is not a *heth*, because it is basically a round letter, not a square one like the rest of the *heths* in this inscription. But there are other round letters which deserve consideration here. Both the *beth* and the *lamed* of this period are round circular letters, and on the *ʿIzbet Şarṭah* Ostrakon they are virtually identical. This is especially true here, given the rather wide variation with which this scribe wrote the same letters. Given a comparison with the *beths* in the third name on this side of the sherd (see below), it is much more likely that this letter is a *lamed* than a *beth*.

The next two letters in this name, those which lie between the *lamed* and the *resh*, are much more difficult to read, because they have been damaged and are faint. A good identification of the next letter, the third in this name, can be made if the sherd is rotated 90 degrees to the right from vertical. When this is done, it can be seen that this letter consists of two curvilinear strokes concave to each other. Slightly more than halfway down between them there is a small *v* pointing downward, toward the left-hand stroke. This ovoid letter makes a nice representation of the human eye; it has an upper lid, a lower lid, and a pupil. The letter which was written in this way was the *ʿayin* and is much more archaic than the *ʿayin* in the first name. There it is much closer to a circle but still has a dot in it. The *ʿayin* on the back side of the sherd is a circle without a dot in it. All of this illustrates the variety with which this scribe could write the forms of his letters.

The letter between the *ʿayin* and the *resh* in this name is best identified by rotating the sherd 90 degrees to the left of vertical. When this is done, it can be seen that the letter cramped in closely by the *ʿayin* is shaped like a "z." As such, it should be taken as a *zayin*. The unusual thing about this *zayin* is that its crossbar extends all the way to the right end of the top bar and all the way to the left end of the bottom bar, so that it looks like a modern "z." This is just one more evidence for the variety with which this scribe wrote his letters. The form of this particular *zayin* might have something to do with its being written so close to the preceding letter.

The Name "Eleazar"

All of the letters of this name have now been read, and in order—from top to bottom—they read as: ²-L-^c-Z-R. Vocalizing the

²aleph with an *e* and the ^cayin with an *a* yields the name of ²El^cāzār or Eleazar. This was the name of the older son of Abinadab of Kiriath-Jearim, and he was the one put in charge of the ark of the covenant when it was brought there from Beth Shemesh (1 Sam 7:1). He was also the brother of Uzzah. This identification brings up a reconsideration of the name of Ahio in 2 Sam 6:3-4. Formerly I took that as a personal name and attempted to match it with Puech's reading of this name as *Ahi^cuz*. Now that this name has disappeared under more careful scrutiny, the reading for the biblical name also deserves to be reexamined.

While most modern English versions of the Bible translate this name as Ahio, some of them at least take note of the alternative, i.e., that this is not a name but a noun—the word for “brother” with a third-person masculine singular suffix, “his.” The RSV, for example, notes in a footnote here, “or, ‘and his brother.’” While the spelling with a *yod* here is a little unusual, I now concur with that alternative translation. Thus “his brother,” the brother of Uzzah in 2 Sam 6:4, should be identified as Eleazar of 1 Sam 7:1. The two brothers, then, were Eleazar and Uzzah. Since Eleazar was the one who was put in charge of the ark when it was brought up from Beth Shemesh, it is safe to assume that he was the older and more responsible son of Abinadab. Indeed, that is the position he occupies in 2 Sam 6:4, for he is the one who walks ahead of the ark, leading it, while Uzzah walked beside it, thus being in a position to reach out to it when it shook on the cart.

The Name “Abinadab”

Thus far we have identified the names of Uzzah and Eleazar on the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon, and these names have been connected with those of the younger and older sons of Abinadab in 2 Sam 6:3-6 and 1 Sam 7:1. We turn next to the third name on the front side of the sherd. Because of the difficulty in reading these letters, most interpreters have not attempted to identify the names present here.

Puech,⁸ on the other hand, has identified the letters, connecting them with something other than a personal name. He read them as *bt yn* and translated this as “*baths of wine.*” Since he saw eight

⁸For Puech's work on this text and his line drawing of it, see notes 2 and 3 above.

dots above the word for the measure of *baths*, and since he found eight more dots elsewhere with the personal names in the text, he held that the initial total of eight *baths* of wine were all distributed to the persons named by the text. In my previous study of this text, I followed this suggestion somewhat uncritically, because it made such a nice correlation. Now, with further examination, this clever and interesting suggestion must, unfortunately, be rejected.

First, we might take the matter of the dots. Puech found eight of them here, but most other copyists have shown only three. I would reduce that number to two, because I think that one of those dots is actually the corner of a letter (see below). I do not see in the photographs the other dots to which Puech refers.

Of the four letters that Puech identified here, *bt yn*, only one appears to be correct, and that is the *beth*. I do not see his *taw* or his *nun* at all in the photographs. The letter which he identified as a *yod* does not have a forked head. Rather it has a circular head in which the stroke of the circle crosses over the vertical leg of the letter. This makes it the same as the *beth* at the beginning of this name, only a mirror image of it, with both of their circular heads pointing inward. The scribe of this text does not appear to have bent the vertical downstrokes or legs of his *beths*.

Next to the first *beth*, at the top or left side of the sherd, is a letter which lies in a horizontal position, actually perpendicular to the vertical leg of the *beth*. This letter is notched or bent at its top, which makes it a *nun* by comparison with the other *nuns* on the reverse side of this text. Thus, for these two letters we have a *beth* and a *nun*, reading from top to bottom, or left to right.

The next letter is located above and slightly to the right of the *nun*. Two of the three incisions that look like dots written above the *beth* and *nun* are circular, but the third is angular, pointing to the left or top of the sherd. This is not another dot for numbering an item; it is the beginning corner of another letter. This letter is composed of a large triangle. That shape makes it a *dalet*. It is very sharply angular, more so than the *dalet* of the *ʿIzbet Šarṭah* Ostrakon, but its triangular shape makes it unmistakably a *dalet*. The other *beth* that we have mentioned above was written to the right or below this *dalet*.

Thus far we have identified four letters in the name: B-N-D-B, but this does not make a complete Hebrew name. Something is missing, and it is missing from the front of the name. Ordinarily one would expect an ^ʾ*aleph* here, thus providing the word ^ʾ*ab* or

“father” as the initial element of this name. When the edge of the sherd is examined closely, it can be seen that there are two horizontal lines written there. They are short, because they go off the edge of the sherd. Like the name at the right-hand or bottom margin of this sherd, this letter was partially broken away when the sherd was damaged after the text had been written upon it. Enough of the tails of this letter remain, however, to identify it as an ^ʔaleph. As a matter of fact, it appears that the ends of the crossbar of the ^ʔaleph have also survived as two dots above and below the tails of this letter.

With this partially damaged letter added to the other letters read in this name, it can now be read as ^ʔB-N-D-B or Abinadab. This is, of course, the name of the father of both Eleazar and Uzzah. It was at his house that the ark of the covenant was stored for twenty years, before it was finally taken up to Jerusalem.

Summary of the Obverse

Thus all three of the names for the male members of this family that were mentioned in the biblical text have survived on the obverse of this sherd. They are also given in order, beginning with the name of the younger son, to which the preposition *l*^e was prefixed. Then the name of the older son is given, and finally the name of the father.

Thus we must now reject Puech's suggestion that “*baths of wine*” are identified here. We do not know what commodity was dispensed or traded or sold. It could have been wine, but it also could have been grain or oil or something else. It should also be noted that whatever the commodity dispensed was, an equal amount was distributed to each of the three persons. One dot appears to the right or above the ^ʔaleph in ^ʕUzz^ʔah's name, and two dots appear between the other two names. I see no other dots on this side of the sherd. I take this as meaning that 1 of x was distributed to Eleazar and 1 of x was distributed to Abinadab, rather than 2 of them being given to the father and none to the older son.

2. Reexamination of the Reverse

The reverse of this sherd deserves a reexamination also. The name Hanun (*hnn*) has been read clearly there in previous studies, and there is one dot below his name, so he received 1 quantity of x

material, just as did the members of Abinadab's family on the obverse of the sherd.

A Reading of the Text

The question then is, What does the first line of this side of the text say? The last two letters at the top or left of this line are clear, and they consist of a notched *nun* and a circular ^ç*ayin*. The wavy line to the right or below the ^ç*ayin* is commonly read as a *mem*, but a *shin* is occasionally entertained for it. A *shin*, however, should have only two notches, whereas this letter has four. If one were to bend one of these down on the lower end of this letter, it would make a nice and customary tail for a *mem*; thus this letter should be identified, as is done by the majority of interpreters, as a *mem*.

The letter to the right or below the *mem* has also been a matter of some controversy. It looks something like a bent stick. For this reason Cross identified it as a *gimmel*.⁹ A *gimmel*, however, should have a head which curves over and downward, not one that angles upward, so this letter does not fit well as a *gimmel*. As an alternative, Puech identified this letter as a *shin*, thus yielding the name of *šm^çn* (Simeon) for the word written here. This was the reading that I followed in my previous study of this text, but which I must now reject. There is no double notching in the head of this letter, so it cannot be a *shin*. The bent axis of the head of this letter suggests that it is another *nun* (three more *nuns* are written on this side of the sherd). Its head is not quite as angular as are those of the other *nuns*; but, nevertheless, it fits best with that letter.

Thus far this word or name reads N-^çM-N from left to right, or top to bottom. If it is read from right to left, or bottom to top, as Hanun on the next line is, it would be N-M-^çN. If one were to take just this much of the line as the name present here, it would read better from left to right or top to bottom, for then the word could be Na^ç*aman*, a good biblical name.

There is one further point that suggests that this name should be read in this direction, as Colless has suggested,¹⁰ and that is the additional letter written just above the *nun* at the top or left of this line. As long ago as 1930, Grimme copied a *beth* followed by a *taw*

⁹Cross, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰Colless, p. 61.

here.¹¹ I think he was quite correct about the *beth*, but I see no trace of his *taw*. This *beth* has a circular head and a tail which angles down to the left and curves only slightly. As such, it makes a better *beth* than a *lamed*. It looks as if there might have been another prepositional *lamed* written at the bottom of this side of the sherd, but it is very faint and not definite. If it is indeed a *lamed*, that would be all the more reason to take this initial letter as a *beth*.

Thus this side of the sherd should now be read as:

1. B
2. N ^c M N
3. N N Ḥ

An Interpretation

The best sense with which to read these lines is that the *beth* should be read vertically with the *nun* below it, making up the word *bn* or *benê* for "sons" in plural construct with the word which follows. That next word should be read left to right as ^c*mn*, or *Ammon*, according to a suggestion put forth by Colless in his study of this text.¹² The next line should then be read boustrophedon, from right to left as *hnn* or *Hanun*. The word on line 3 is obviously a personal name, whereas that which precedes it is an identifier for this individual—a person who is one of the *benê Ammon*, the common biblical designation for the country and people of the Ammonites.

There is one dot below the name of *Hanun*, and that is for the quantity of material which he received. No similar dots appear above the name of *Ammon*. Thus this side of the sherd should be transliterated:

- 1) *b-2)-enê Ammon: 3) Ḥanun-1.*

The name of *Hanun*, identified here as an Ammonite, is of considerable historical interest, as the king of the Ammonites whom David engaged (according to 2 Sam 10) was also named *Hanun*. Since we know that David was a contemporary of Abinadab, Eleazar, and Uzzah (of Kiriath-Jearim), named on the obverse of this

¹¹H. Grimme, "Die altkanaanäische Buchstabenschrift zwischen 1500 und 1250 v. Chr.," *AFO* 10 (1935-6): 267-281. See especially p. 271 for Grimme's photographs of the sherd and his accompanying line drawings.

¹²Colless, p. 61.

sherd, and that he was also a contemporary of Hanun of the Ammonites, the Hanun identified as an Ammonite on the reverse of this sherd was also a contemporary of those three residents of Kiriath-Jearim. For an Ammonite to have sent as far as Beth Shemesh on the western slope or Shephelah of Judah to trade or purchase, he must have been a figure of some importance in his own country, as Hanun was. At the time represented by the writing of the sherd, the ark had not yet been transported to Jerusalem (because Uzzah was still alive), and Hanun was probably still crown prince, since his father Nahash was still alive at this time, according to 2 Sam 10:1. As crown prince, Hanun still fits the position of importance among the Ammonites that the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon would accord him.

3. *Conclusion*

Finally, then, the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon may be transcribed as a whole as follows:

Obverse:

1. L^c Z^p H - 1
2. ^p L^c Z R - 1
3. [ʔ] B N D B - 1

Reverse:

1. B
2. N^c M N
3. N N H - 1

And it may be translated as follows:

Obverse:

1. To Uzzah - 1
2. (&) Eleazar - 1
3. (&) Abinadab - 1

Reverse:

[To] Sons of Ammon: Hanun - 1

The text has turned out to be a record of considerable historical significance in spite of its brevity, its damage, and its mundane purpose. Each of the four persons named by it has biblical connections: Abinadab in 1 Sam 7 and 2 Sam 6; Eleazar in 1 Sam 7; Uzzah in 2 Sam 6; and finally, Hanun of the Ammonites in 2 Sam 10.

In my study of the *Izbet Şarṭah* Ostrakon, I found one personal name which was also reflected in the biblical record, that of Hophni. While that text provides more information in terms of historical narrative, this text, by way of contrast, provides no historical narrative, only a list of personal names of individuals with whom business was conducted. What makes this text remarkable is that all four of these individuals—in contrast to but one mentioned in the *Izbet Şarṭah* Ostrakon—are known from the biblical record. That makes it a remarkable record from a personal and statistical point of view.