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A LITERARY OSTRACON FROM ḤORVAT ʿUZA

Itzhaq Beit-Arieh

Introduction

In the course of excavations conducted during 1982–1988 at Ḥorvat ʿUza in the eastern Negev, some 31 inscriptions were uncovered, most of them in Hebrew (Beit-Arieh 1986; Beit-Arieh and Cresson 1991). Two of the more important ostraca have already been published (Beit-Arieh 1985; 1987; Beit-Arieh and Cresson 1985). A third one, which is of special significance due to its apparent literary character, is published here in advance of the final excavation report.¹

The ostracon discussed here was discovered in the eastern compartment of the front chamber of the gate in Stratum IV, dated to the second half of the 7th century B.C.E. It was found in an earth layer about 30 cm. above the floor level.

Description of the Ostracon

The ostracon is complete. The inscription appears on a large fragment of the rounded, inside surface of a burnished bowl with a burnished infolded rim, characteristic of the end of the Iron Age (Fig. 1). The text comprises 13 lines with wide margins at both ends (Figs. 2–4). About half of the words are badly preserved, only the faintest trace remaining. The legible letters number about 110, with some 17 complete words dispersed at random over eight lines of the inscription.

The document is written in a fluent scribal hand by a skilled scribe who set out the inscription in an aesthetic manner. All lines, with the exception of the shorter last line which is centrally positioned, begin from a straight edge and end, apparently, with a complete word. The last two lines are written on the rim of the bowl fragment, but the writing is unaffected by the curvature of the sherd and is identical to that of the other lines. There are no graphical marks or obvious separations between the words.

¹ After reaching my own reading of the ostracon, with the invaluable help of Prof. J. Naveh and Dr. Ada Yardeni, I approached Prof. F.M. Cross, who had already inspected the ostracon and seen my proposed reading, with the request to propose his own reading based on a study of a photograph and facsimile of the inscription. Prof. Cross kindly consented. Since his suggested reading differs in several respects from my own, we both agreed it would be best for the readings to be published separately and *in toto*, rather than as variants in a single publication (see Appendix). At the same time, I have adopted two of Prof. Cross's readings as noted below in the text analysis. The cleaned ostracon was photographed in the usual manner by the Institute's photographer, A. Hay. It was rephotographed later with infra-red illumination in the Forensic Laboratory of the Israel Police Headquarters in Jerusalem. Dr. Ada Yardeni prepared a facsimile of the inscription from the photographs and from the ostracon itself. I wish to express here my sincere thanks to all of them.

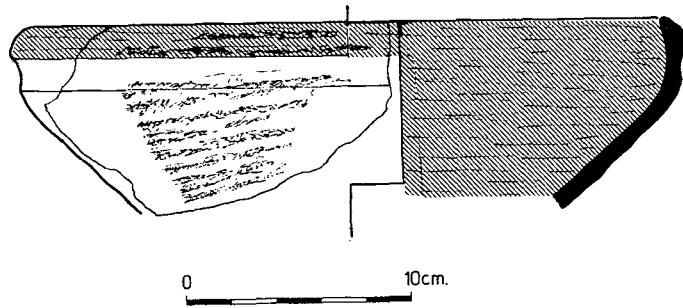


Fig. 1. The bowl from which the ostrakon sherd originated.

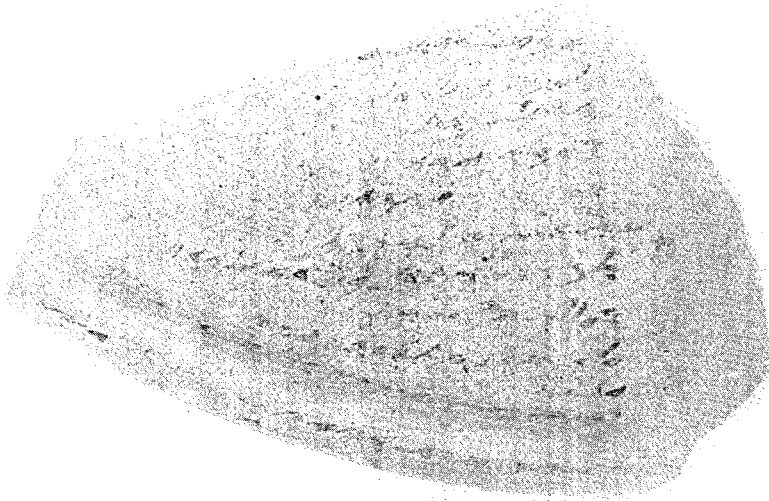


Fig. 2. The complete ostrakon.



Fig. 3. The lower part of the ostrakon.

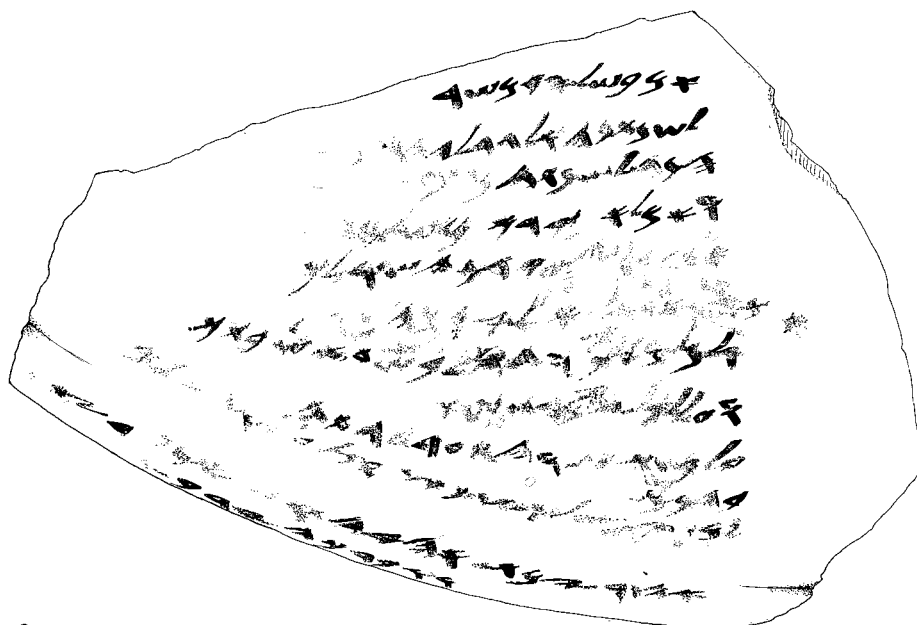


Fig. 4. The text of the ostrakon.

Palaeography

From both the palaeographic and calligraphic viewpoints the writing is identical to that of the ostraca from Arad Strata VI and VII, as well as to the other ostraca from Ḥorvat 'Uza, which are dated to the second half of the 7th century B.C.E.

Transcription

1. <i>ʾm bslv bmsr</i>	אמ בשלו במשר
2. <i>lšntnh ʾl gdlyh —</i>	לשנתנה אל גדליה —
3. <i>hnh lšnth...</i>	הנה לשנתה...
4. <i>wʾmlʾ — dk...</i>	ואמלא — דכ...
5. <i>... hm yšqlk</i>	...המ ישקלכ
6. <i>... ly-- h...</i>	...לי--ה...
7. <i>ʾl mtyk w-q-bšʿt šbtk</i>	אל מתיכ וק-בשעת שבתכ
8. <i>wʿllk...š...</i>	ועללכ...ש...
9. <i>ʿl p...whʿrʿrth</i>	על פ...והתערערתה
10. <i>bānh</i>	בונה
11. <i>-m...l-š-š-</i>	-מ...ל-ש-ש-
12. <i>ʾsr ymt whyh q...ʿš</i>	אצר ימת והיה ק...עצ
13. <i>wqbrkh ḥrb</i>	וקברכה חרב

Translation

1. If in quiet and in straightforward
2. To jeer (?) (to) Gedalya —
3. ———
4. and if not ...
5. ...you shall be weighed
6. ———
7. to your male people at the time (you
were sitting) in your place
8. your child(ren) (deed)...
9. on ...and you shall be destroyed
10. in his judgment
11. ———
12. allotment of days [and your harvest
was crushed(?)]
13. and your grave will be destroyed

Decipherment and Interpretation

Line 1

אם בשל- במשר — *m bšl- bmšr*

The first word of this line can have either a conditional or temporal meaning (“if” or “when”). The first alternative would suit the context better if our reading of the fourth line ואם לא (“and if not”) is correct. The main difficulty in Line 1 is the sixth letter which is blurred. At first, I was inclined to read it as a *yod*, slanting to the right (distinct from other examples of this letter on the ostrakon) and thus to make the word out as בשלי (*bšly*). This word is not known from any extra-biblical source, and is a *hapax legomenon*, i.e., it occurs only once in the Bible, in 2 Sam. 3:27 ויטתהו... “ויכהו אתו בשלי לדבר” (“and he took him aside... to speak to him privately, and here he smote him”). Thus, the meaning of the word would seem to be “secretly”, “covertly”. However, after some consideration, it seems that it would be best to read the sixth letter as a *waw* whose lower part has been obliterated. Moreover, the slant to the right is better suited to a *waw* than a *yod* in this case, cf. the *waw* in the first word of Line 4.

If the latter interpretation is indeed correct, then we get the word בשלו (*bšlw*), i.e., an abbreviated form of שלוה, meaning “at peace”, “at ease”, “well-being”. Two analogies occur in the Bible: Jer. 49:31 גוי שלי יושב לבטח (“a nation at ease, that dwells securely”), and Ps. 30:7 ואני אמרתי בשלוי כל אמוט לעולם (“I said in my prosperity, I shall never be moved”).

An additional possibility, suggested by J. Naveh, which has biblical textual support, would be to draw out this sign to form the letter *mem* and to read 'בשלם' (*bšlm*). However, no trace of a downstroke can be discerned, and the rightward slant of the vestigial sign is in the opposite direction to that required for a *mem*.

bmšr — במשר

In most cases in the Bible this word refers to the geographical entity of the Moab Plain. However, in some contexts it assumes a figurative sense of “uprightness”, “justice” (Isa. 11:4; Mal. 2:6; Ps. 45:7; 67:5). Elsewhere in the Bible an analogous term מישור is used to signify “rightful” or “equitable” judgment by a divine agency (Ps. 58:2; 75:3; 98:9). More to the point in our case, however, would seem to be the verse in Mal. 2:6 “בשלום ובמישור הלך אתי...” (“he walked with me in peace and uprightness”). This suggests that the inscription includes a similar formulation: אם בשלם במשר. In that case, the undecipherable sixth letter of the inscription would be in fact the letter *mem*, although, as noted above, the epigraphical basis for this reading is weak. Accordingly, we may interpret the first line of the inscription as either: “If by way of peace and straightforwardness”, or “If in peace and uprightness”.

Line 2

lšntnh ʿl gdlyh[w] — לשנתנה אל גדליהו

The writing in this line is clear, and is only effaced at its very end. The first word *lšntnh* is evidently a verbal form which could be derived from the root שןן. It is not known in any extra-biblical source. In the Bible its meaning is to “sharpen” (a sword), or to “mock”, “jeer”, “taunt” (Deut. 32:41; Ps. 64:4). A second possibility is the root שנה (*snh*), which in the Bible means to “change” (for example: Jer. 52, 33: “ושינה את בגדי כלאר”) (“and changed his prison garments...”) or to “repeat” (1 Kgs. 34, 18: “ויאמר שנו וישנו”) (“and he said, do it the second time and they did it the second time”). Apparently, this word provides the key to understanding the entire inscription. It would appear to be a verbal form referring to the ‘Gedalya[hu]’ at the end of the line: i.e., “to jeer (taunt) Gedalyahu(?)”

Line 3

hnh lšnth — הנה לשנתה

The writing in this line is clear, except for the third letter of the first word which is partly obliterated. The forward slant and the direction of the surviving strokes support an identification of this letter as an *he*. The second word, *לשנתה* (*lšnth*), apparently ended with an *he*, of which the two bottom horizontal strokes are lost. It would appear that this is the same verbal form, with the same meaning, as the first word in the previous line. If so, then this line repeats, and thus reinforces, the

statement in Line 2. However, as already stated, the meaning of the verbal form is unclear.

Line 4

וּמִן לֹא יָדַךְ — *w'm l' -dk*

The reading of the first five letters is quite clear, but the rest of the line is blurred. The letters וּמִן לֹא (*w'm l'*) could be a single word which in biblical text means “to put into effect” “to increase authority”, “to consecrate” (Exod. 28:41; 29:9). Many other examples could be cited. If this understanding is correct, we may read the second word יָדַךְ (*ydck*) as “your hand”, and the complete line as וּמִן לֹא יָדַךְ “to increase the force of your hand” or “to enhance your authority”. However, the sixth letter is not complete and, instead of the *yod* that we have suggested, it might be the vestige of an *he*. Similarly, the *daleth* could be read as *resh*, although the word would be meaningless without additional letters at the end.

Another possibility is to read the first collocation of letters as two separate words לֹא וּמִן (“if not”). This suggestion is all the more attractive considering that the inscription begins with the word אִם (“if”). Thus, Line 4 would seem to complement the conditional “if” at the beginning of the document.

Line 5

...הֵם וְיִשְׁקֹלְךָ — *...hm yšqlk*

Of the first word in this line only the last two letters are legible; apparently an *he* lacking the two horizontal strokes, and probably a *mem*. The second word is clearly יִשְׁקֹלְךָ (*yšqlk*) “you shall be weighed” (in the scales of justices?) as in Job 31:6 “יִשְׁקֹלֵנִי בַמֵּאזֵנִי צָדִיק” (“let me be weighed in a just balance”). The line, therefore, may be construed: “Your actions will be judged”.

Line 6

...לִי--הֵם... — *...ly--h...*

In this almost completely effaced line the only letters that can be read are two contiguous letters *ly* and, near the end of the line, an *he*. As a consequence, no meaning can be ascribed to this line.

Line 7

אֶל-מִתֵּיךְ וְיָקֵץ בִּשְׁעַת שְׁבֹתְךָ — *ʾl mtyk w-q-bšʿt šbtk*

Only the beginning and the end of this line can be read clearly, the middle portion having been effaced in one way or another. However, several of the damaged letters can be reconstructed from their general outline.

The first collocation of letters can be divided into two words: the first clearly ʾl (“to”), and a second word that begins with a clear *mem* and ends with the letters *yod*

and *kaph* — which are less certain. The letter that follows the *mem* might well have been a *taw*, the only letter to produce a meaningful word in the context. The word would then be מתיך *mtyk* probably in the sense of “your male people” (Deut. 2:34 “כל עיר מתם והנשים והטף”, “Every city, men, women and children”).

The third word may possibly begin with a *waw*, but the rest of its signs are undecipherable.

The fourth and fifth words are, apparently, *bsʿt* (“at the time”), and *šbtk* (“your place”), respectively.

Line 8

ועללכ...ש — *wʿllk...š*

In this short line only the first word is legible, of which the last letter is blurred. It appears to have been a *kaph*, yielding the word ‘עללך’ (*ʿllk*) meaning “your child” or “your deed”.

Line 9

על פ...והתעררתה — *ʿl p...whʿrʿrth*

The first two letters of this line are ʿl (“on”), while the third letter *pe* probably began another word.

For the word *whʿrʿrth* I adopt Prof. Cross’s reading of “destroy”, “tear down” (in the past tense) (Jer. 51:58 “חומות בבל הרחבה ערער תתערער” “The broad walls of Babylon... shall be levelled to the ground”). The *th* at the end of this word occurs regularly in biblical and extra-biblical sources of this period. In the Bible it appears 111 times, e.g., Gen. 3:12 נתתה (*ntth*), 1 Sam. 15:3 והכיתה (*hykth*), Isa. 37:23 הרימותה (*hrymoth*), Mal. 2:14 בגדתה (*bgdth*), etc. It also appears in some of the First Temple period inscriptions: e.g., Arad inscriptions No. 7 Line 6, No. 40 Line 9 (Aharoni 1981); Lachish Letters 2:6, 3:8 (*Lachish D*); Khirbet el-Kom inscription (Dever 1969–1970:158–160).

Line 10

בדנה — *bdnh*

Of the single word in this line the first and the third letters are clear. It is possible that the reading is בדנה (*bdnh*). The meaning would thus be “in his judgment”.

Line 11

מ...ל-ש-ש — *m...l-š-š*

This long line is almost completely effaced and only isolated characters can be identified. No meaningful reconstruction suggests itself.

Line 12

אצר ימת והיה ק...עץ — *ʿsr ymt whyh q...ʿs*

This long line is written on the rim of the bowl fragment near the joint with the body. For the most part it is legible. The initial two words *אצר ימת* (*ʿsr ymt*) suggest two plausible interpretations. The first one, proposed by Prof. Cross, reads the first word in the biblical sense of “storing up”, “accumulating” (Isa. 39:6; Amos 3:10), while the second word is seen as the plural of *יום* (*ywm*), meaning “day”. The phrase thus means: “Allotment (quota) of days”.

In the second interpretation, the word *אצר* (*ʿsr*) is understood in the alternative biblical sense of “harvest”, “yield” (Joel 1:17; Neh. 13:12; 2 Chr. 11:11), or in the sense of “treasury for precious objects” (2 Kgs. 14:14; 18:15; 16:8), or “storehouses for produce” (Jer. 17:3; 50:37; Prov. 8:21; etc). The second word *ימת* (*ymt*), in this interpretation, has its ordinary meaning of “annihilate”, “destroy”.

The conjunction *והיה* (*whyh*) that follows the first two words naturally relates to the word after it, of which only the first letter *qoph* survives, while of the last word in this line only the final letters (*ʿs*) remain. Reconstructing the missing characters in light of the second interpretation suggested above, we may read *והיה ק[נינך נר]עץ* (*whyh q[nynk nr]ʿs*) “your property is smashed, destroyed” (Judg. 10:8 *וירעצו את בני ישראל* “and they crushed and oppressed the Israelites”). An alternative reconstruction in the same sense might be *והיה ק[צרך נר]עץ* (*whyh q[ʿrk nr]ʿs*) “and your harvest was crushed” (Jer. 5:17 *“ואכל קצירך ולחמך”* “they shall eat your harvest and your food”).

Prof. Naveh has suggested yet another interpretation: (*whyh qbrh bʿʿs*) “and you shall die and your grave shall be in the shade of a tree”.

Line 13

wqbrkh ḥrb — וקברכה חרב

This last line is distinctly readable. It expresses one of the gravest maledictions that could be invoked against a person in ancient Israel, e.g., Isa. 14:19: “you are cast out from your tomb like a loathed offspring”. Tomb inscriptions from the First Temple period warned off potential violators of graves with the direst curses. For example, the wall inscription from Silwan Tomb No. 35 *“אשר על הבית”* ends with the words: “cursed be the person who opens this” (Avigad 1953:143–148).

The use of the final *he* as a vowel letter is common in the Bible (see above Line 9), while the ending *כה* (*kh*) appears in Gen. 10:19 *באכה* (*bʿkh*); Exod. 13:16 *ידכה* (*ydkh*); Jer. 29:25 *בשמכה* (*bšmkh*).

Summary

Despite the fact that more than half the words of the inscription are undecipherable, those that remain give the impression that this was an unconventional document. The content is neither economic nor administrative (like most 8th-6th centuries B.C.E. ostraca from Israel and Judah), but rather of a literary character couched in elevated biblical language.

The inscription as it stands is apparently not addressed to any specific person. However, it is possible (as assumed by Prof. Cross) that our ostrakon is the second part of a longer document, and that the person (or group) addressed was mentioned in the missing first part. The content of the inscription, insofar as can be construed from its readable parts, comprises a demand made to some unspecified person (or group) to attend to a certain matter, which if not executed will bring upon that person (or group) a most severe punishment. It would appear that the central personage around which the inscription revolves is the Gedalya(hu) mentioned in the second line. Thus, our proposed understanding of the document's contents is:

If you execute in a quiet and straightforward manner the (unknown) assignment stated in Line 2, you will be fittingly recompensed (this was probably written in Line 3). However, if you fail to do so (Line 4), there will follow the severe repercussions described in Lines 5–13.

It seems that the key to a full understanding of the document is the words *lšntnh* and *lšnth* in Lines 2 and 3, which at this stage have no adequate interpretation.

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APPENDIX

A SUGGESTED READING OF THE ḤORVAT 'UZA OSTRACON

Frank Moore Cross

1. 'm bšly bmšr[
2. lšn[?]ḥh wlgdl y[
3. hnh lšnth[
4. w'mP yr' k(?)l(?)[
5. []dk yšqlk [h cf. Job. 31:6
6. []š(?)l 'ly[..<]h[
7. 'l m[] wys' bkyt šbtkh[
8. w'lli ys'[
9. 'l pn[ykh]whi'r'rth[
10. bdnt
11. y(?)mḥš zr'tykh[]bpls[cf. Ps. 37:17, etc.
12. 'šr ymt. whyh tr[^clh?] w[r]^cš
13. wqbrkh ḥrb

1. if, in quietude (and) in a place of safety [
2. to change it (?) and to magnify...[
3. Behold to change it (?) [
4. and if not, he will fear all (?)...[
5. [] ... (?) he will weigh you [
6. []
7. to [] and he removed the weeping of your sitting (in mourning) [
8. and violent deeds he will remove...[
9. before you (?) and you will be stripped naked [
10. in judgments (?)
11. he will shatter your arms (might) ... in shuddering [
12. restricted in days. And there shall be reeling ? and tearing (?) [
13. and your grave will be desolate.

- 1.2 wlgdl not 'lgdl
- 1.4 the *aleph* of yr' is clear. I don't think ydt is good, much less ydk.
- 1.7 wys' bkyt seems clear.
- 1.9 whi'r'rth is in my opinion certain. Note the -th form.
- 1.11 []mḥš is clear. The *zayin* of zr'tykh is less than clear.
- 1.12 ymt, the literary plural is notable. 'šr in its Arabic sense.
- 1.12 tr[is clear, nothing else before [^cš. wr]^cš "shattering" is possible or conceivably [š]bš confusion.

- 1.13 *qbrkh*. Note form. *ḥrb* or *šrb*, “shimmering desert” is possible for the final word.

Interestingly enough, I find no clear instance of the article or *'t*, again pointing to the literary or even poetic character of the text.

I suspect that this ostrakon is the end of a longer literary text, the first portion appearing in another column or sherd.