The Ostracon of Ahiqam from Horvat 'Uza

Itzhaq Beit-Arieh

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Horvat 'Uza, located in the eastern Negeb about 10 km. south of Arad, was occupied during the 7th century B.C.E. by an Israelite fortress, which was destroyed at the beginning of the 6th century B.C.E.. Five seasons of excavations (1982–1986) were conducted so far at the site, co-sponsored by the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University and Baylor University of Waco, Texas, co-directed by the author and Dr. B. Cresson (Beit-Arieh and Cresson 1982; 1983; Beit–Arieh 1986). Among the important finds were 23 ostraca and inscriptions, 22 of which are in Hebrew and one in the Edomite script (Beit-Arieh and Cresson 1985).*

The ostracon of Ahiqam was found during the second season in the front guardroom of the fortress gate. This room is divided into two chambers by a wall. The ostracon (Reg. No. 1539/1) came from the floor of the frontal chamber (Locus 336) (Pl. 2:1). The inscription was written on the outer side of a pithos fragment measuring about 12 x 12.5 cm. It occupied the upper part of the fragment and is apparently complete (Fig. 1; Pl. 2:2). The text consists of four lines, written in large script by an evidently untrained hand. The writing is generally well preserved (except for two words in the first line). The words are separated from each other by dots.

Transcription

1. *–lm. l'hqm. bn. m––m*   .1 מ--מ .בן .לאחקם .לם-
2. *'mdyhw. bn. zkr. mmldh*   .2 ממלדה .זכר .בן .עמדיהו
3. *hoš'yhw. bn. nwy. mrn/ptn*   .3 מרנ/פתן .נוי .בן .הושעיהו
4. *mky. bn. hslyhw. mmqdh*   .4 ממקדה .הצליהו .בן .מכי

Translation

1. – – – to Ahiqam, son of *m––m*
2. 'Amadyahu son of Zakkur, from Moladah
3. Hosha'yahu, son of Nawy, from *rn/ptn,*
4. Machi, son of Hisilyahu, from Makkedah

Commentary

Line 1

Only two words of this line are clear, the other two being partially illegible.

– *l m.* The first letter here is faded. Only the bottom curve, which is similar to the bottom part of *'ayin*, remains. In the Hebrew version of this article I mentioned the possibility that the sign could be the left half of a *shin* (even though it was formed
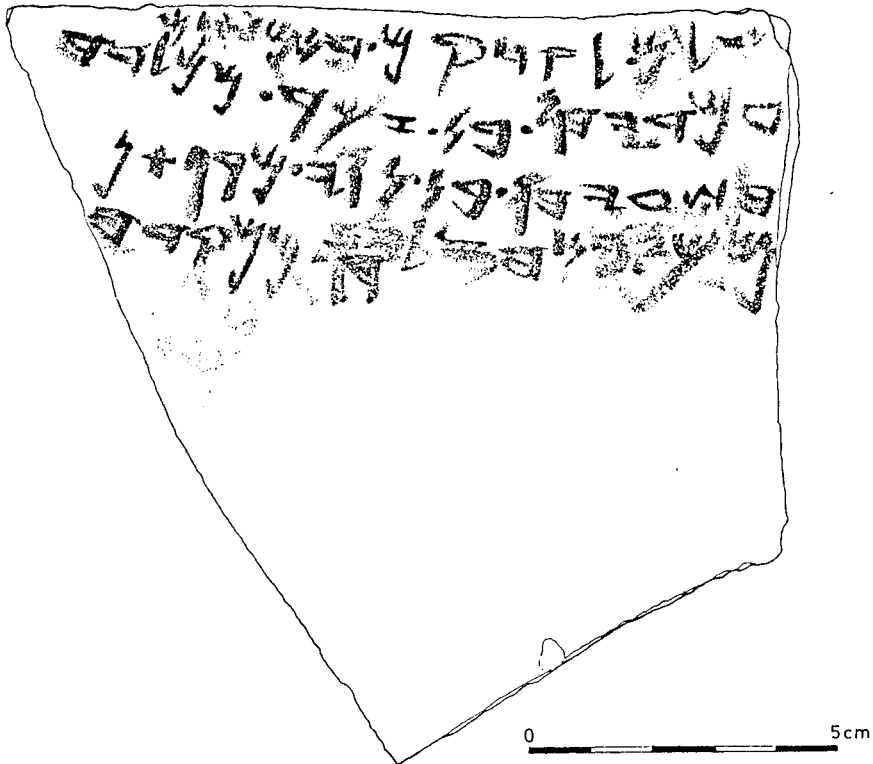

Fig. 1. Facsimile of the ostracon.

differently from the *shin* in the third line), which would give us the word *š l m* (shalom). However, since this possibility is very problematic, I left the space for the first letter blank in the transcription.

Now, however, after rechecking all possibilities, it seems to me that the sign could also be an *'ayin*. Moreover, it is most unlikely that another sign could have preceded this letter. Thus it seems that according to the second possibility we have here *'ayin, lamed, mem*, which gives us the word עלמ (= עולים).

This verb is very common in the Bible as an idiom meaning to take action, as for example לעלות עליהם לצבא, "to make war against them" (Josh. 22:12, 33). The root of this verb (עלה) has several meanings, but the most common in the Bible is "to ascend, to climb": "As they went up the hill to the city ..." (1 Sam. 9:11); "And from there he went up to Penuel" (Judg. 8:8). The formula of the text could therefore be: "(These are the people who) are going up to (the place of) Aḥiqam." More freely translated, this was an order to go to Aḥiqam. This idea is paralleled in Letter No. 24 from Arad (Aharoni 1981), which states (lines 19–20): האנשים את אלישע, which Aharoni interprets as an abbreviated form of speech dictated apparently by the commander to the scribe: "The men (must as soon as possible) be with Elisha!" (*ibid.*:49) in any case, the word עלמ suits well the contents of the letter.

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The problem with any reading of the first word, of course, is that the first letter is so fragmentary as to be mostly illegible. If it were legible, we would have to accept it even though it produced a rare or previously unknown combination of letters. Moreover, there are no analogies for either word appearing as the opening of a letter.

It should also be noted that the preposition ל... is very rare, both in the Bible and on ostraca, where the prepositions את or אל are commonly used. Nevertheless, it does appear in a number of cases: "אעלה ואגידה לפרעה" ("I will go and tell pharaoh": Genesis 46:31) or in 2 Sam. 17:21: "וילכו מהבאר וילכו ויגידו למלך" ("The pair got out of the well and went to tell king David").

'ḥqm . "Ahikam, son of Shaphan" (2 Kgs. 22:12), was one of King Josiah's ministers (*Enc. Miqr. I*:221). In extra-biblical sources, the name appears in a 7th century B.C.E. ostracon from Tel Arad (Aharoni 1981: No.31), in three bullae (Avigad 1986: Nos. 14–16) and probably in the incomplete form *'ḥq[m]* inscribed on the shoulder of a storage jar of the same period from Tel 'Ira (unpublished). Both at Tel 'Ira and in our ostracon the spelling is deficient.

m – – m. Only the first and last letter are legible, but there is no doubt that a personal name was intended. We therefore venture to complete *m n h m* (Menahem), particularly since the faint lines before the final *mem* seem to fit *ḥet* better than any other letter.

Although the only biblical instance of this name is Menahem, son of Gadi, king of Israel (2 Kgs. 15:14, 17), it is fairly common in extra-biblical sources: the Arad ostraca, Hebrew seals and bullae, and in Ugaritic, Phoenician and Ammonite inscriptions (*Enc. Miqr. V*:30–32; Aharoni 1981: No. 72; Benz 1972:141, 359–360; Naveh 1980:167; Avigad 1986:105). The alternative completion *m š l m* (Meshulam) cannot be ruled out either, since this biblical name is also common in extra-biblical sources (*Enc. Miqr. V*: 566–567; Aharoni 1981: No. 39; Hestrin and Dayagi-Mendeles 1978: No. 14; Avigad 1986: *passim*; Shiloh 1986:29).

If we look at the ostracon as a whole, we get the impression that the last word of line 1 was added as an afterthought; the word is squeezed in between the second line and the edge of the sherd, its last two letters actually touching the letters of line 2. The small size of the final *mem* adds to the impression that this word was a later insertion. Hence we may assume that the scribe initially thought it sufficient to write only the name Ahiqam, evidently considering him well enough known not to require the addition of his father's name. Later he may have reconsidered the matter and added the patronyn as well, so as to leave no doubt regarding Ahiqam's identity.

Line 2
'mdyhw. Until recently, 'Amadyahu (or 'Imadiyahu) has been considered solely a woman's name (Diringer 1934:218, No. 61; Lemaire 1986:309–310) here and in another inscription (see below) it appears as a man's name. The name does not occur in the Bible, but two examples from extra-biblical sources have recently come to light. The first appears on a bulla (Avigad 1986: No. 93), which the author reads *'madiyahu*, and the

second — most probably *ʿmadyw* — is inscribed on a jar handle found during the last season of excavations at Tel Dan (I thank the excavator, Prof. A Biran, for this information).[1]

zkr. The name is common in the Bible (Zaccur: 1 Chr. 4:26, etc.) as well as in Hebrew seals, bullae and ostraca (*Enc. Miqr. II*:919–920; Aharoni 1981: Nos. 38, 48, 67; Avigad 1975:66–71; 1986: Nos. 50, 51, bullae; Shiloh 1986:28–29).

mldh. Moladah is one of the Negeb towns of Judah (Josh. 15:26), mentioned in the list of Simeonite cities as well (Josh. 19:2; 1 Chr. 4:28). It also figures among the places in the Negeb settled by the exiles returning from Babylon (Neh. 11:26). Y. Aharoni, on the suggestion of B. Mazar, identified it with Khirbet el-Watan (Ḥorvat Yatan), which is located approximately 6.5 km. northwest of Tel ʿIra (*Enc. Miqr. IV*: 723–724), but the two names, the Arabic and the Hebrew, have different meanings.

Several scholars identify Moladah with Tel Malḥata, as indeed was suggested originally by Robinson (Robinson and Smith 1841:619–622), but most of them do not accept this identification (see, for example, Aharoni, *op. cit.*; Möller and Schmitt 1976; Naʼaman 1980:136–137). Since the identification of Moladah with Kh. el-Watan (Ḥ Yatan) and likewise Ḥormah with Tel Malḥata, is doubtful (see Naʼaman 1980:136–143) it seems that there are sufficient grounds to support the possible identification of Moladah with Tel Malḥata. Adding the place of residence or origin to a name (as in the case of *ʿmdyhw* and others mentioned in the ostracon) provides an unmistakable personal identification tag. This identifying device is often used in the Bible, for example, "and his mother's name was Zibiah of Beer-sheba" (2 Kgs. 12:2). As our ostracon shows, this device was also employed in everyday communication.

Line 3

Hšʿyhw. Hoshʿayahu is mentioned in the Bible (Hoshaiah; Neh. 12:22) and is also common in extra-biblical sources: the Lachish letters, the Meṣad Ḥashavyahu letter and Hebrew seals and bullae (*Enc. Miqr. II*: 806; *Lachish I*:51; Naveh 1964; Hestrin and Dayagi–Mendeles 1978: Nos. 53, 73; Shiloh 1986:29; Avigad 1986:105).

nwy. This personal name is not mentioned in the Bible and appears here for the first time in an extra-biblical source. It may be derived from the Hebrew root *n w h*, "extoll, praise." (cf. Exod. 15:2).[2]

rn/ptn. I hesitated over the reading of the first *nun* in this word, which is thicker and more elongated than the other *nun*'s in the text. Conceivably, it might even be a *pe*, since its top is formed somewhat differently from the other *nun*'s in the text. (Unfortunately, there is no definite *pe* in this text for comparative purposes.) However, in the final analysis, this *nun* is more like the short *nun*'s in the text than any other letter. It should

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1   The same name but with the element —*yahu* at the beginning (Yehuʿamad) is inscribed on a sarcophagus from Beth-phage (Milik 1971).

2   For a linguistic analysis of *nwy* see R. Zadok in his forthcoming monograph on the pre-Hellenistic Israelite onomasticon.

also be noted that the scribe of our ostracon had a general tendency to write with thick strokes (an outstanding example is the top of the *yod* of *'mdyhw*).

The above considerations brought us to the reading *rntn* or, if the second letter of the word is *pe, rptn*. Neither toponym is known in either biblical or extra-biblical sources. If *rntn*, the name may come from the Hebrew root *r-n-n* ("song, exaltation"). By analogy with biblical cities such as Holon, Gibbethon, Hebron, Avdon and Shomron (see Borée 1968:57–61), its last syllable should probably be pronounced with a long 'o' (Rinatōn). However, the Bible also has places with *taw-nun* endings such as *q r t n* (Kartan) Josh. 21:32).

So far, we lack data to identify *rntn* or *rptn* with any known site. It should be noted that Mazar's suggested identification (included in Beit-Arieh 1985) to identify *rntn* with Dannah (ρεννα in the Septuagint), located in the Hebron hills (Josh. 15:49), has been shown to be linguistically inadmissable; although *dalet* and *resh* were interchanged, there is no possibility to turn Rennah/Dannah into *rntn*. (I thank Dr. R. Zadok for pointing this out to me).

Line 4

mky. The personal name Machi (hypocoristic of Michaiahu or Michaihu) appears once in the Bible (Num. 13:15) and is known in three extra-biblical sources: on a Hebrew seal, on an ostracon from the Arad citadel and in the Yeb documents (Cowly 1923, No. 1:11; Rainey 1977; *Enc. Miqr. IV*:959–960).

hṣlyhw. Although common in extra-biblical sources, the name Hiṣilyahu is not mentioned in the Bible. It appears on Hebrew seals from Lachish, Jerusalem and Gibeon, as well as on ostraca from Lachish (Hestrin and Dayagi-Mendeles 1978: Nos. 59–60; Mazar 1972:88; *Lachish III*:331) and Ḥorvat 'Uza (unpublished). It is also found on several Judean bullae (Avigad 1986: Nos. 49A–B, 128, 168).

mqdh. Makkedah appears here for the first time in an epigraphical source from the First Temple period. In the Bible it is the name of a Canaanite city taken by Joshua during the conquest, and is mentioned among the towns of Judah in the Shephelah (Josh.10:28; 15:41). The various suggestions for identifying the site of Makkedah rely on biblical-geographical considerations (*Enc. Miqr. V*:303–304; Rainey 1980; Dorsey 1980). Dorsey revived Holzinger's (1901:39) suggestion, followed by others, for identifying Makkedah with Kh. Beit Maqdûm located in the southern Shephelah some 11 km. from Lachish. But his suggestion is to identify Makkedah with nearby Kh. el-Qôm (Dever 1978) which has more appropriate archaeological remains (Dever 1978). Even so, the latter site still lacks Late Bronze Age or Iron Age I levels.

The script

The penmanship of the ostracon is not fluid and it was apparently written slowly and labouriously by an untrained hand. Naveh considers it a good example of the vulgar cursive script used by someone who had learned to write but did not have enough practise to develop his style. The crude handwriting of the scribe is discernable by its

tendency toward straight strokes in certain letters (*alef, dalet, he, waw, zayin, yod, kaf, lamed, nun, resh, shin, taw*) and curved, widely arched lines in other letters (*mem, 'ayin, qof*).

One of the interesting features of this script is the form of the *qof*, which in this period is better known in the lapidary script (*Beer-sheba I*: Pls. 42:4; 69:2) and on engraved seals and bullae (Naveh 1982:77; Avigad 1986:102; Shiloh 1986:30–31). Another feature of interest is the broad-topped *mem*, which recalls the *mem* on seals dating from the end of the First Temple period.

Summary

If my second suggestion regarding the reading of the first word of the ostracon as עלם is correct, the contents of the text are fairly clear and logical. It may be assumed that the three men mentioned here, one of whom resided in the Negeb, one in the Judean Shephelah and the third in an unidentified place called *rn/ptn*, were sent with this written order to Ahiqam, perhaps commander of the fortress at 'Uza. Alternatively the text might have been a copy of a letter sent from 'Uza to Aḥiqam at an unspecified destination.

In any case, we have here an administrative document providing information on the scope of the military organization in Judah towards the end of the First Temple period. The men stationed at 'Uza at this time had been mobilized from various districts in Judah, including a comparatively remote place like Makeddah. Transfer of troops from one place to another was an inevitable feature of the military deployment of the Judean authorities. This is strikingly illustrated by Arad letter No. 24, in which the commander of the fortress is ordered to send immediate reinforcements to Ramat-Negeb.

The document also emphasizes the focal position of the fortress at Ḥorvat 'Uza in the southeastern Negeb defense line and in the array of forts protecting the communication routes of the region.

All but one of the personal names were common in Judah during this period and are known from both biblical and extra-biblical sources. The exception is *nwy*, which appears here for the first time. Moladah and Makkedah are two settlements that are mentioned for the first time in an extra-biblical source. A toponym unknown till now in either a biblical or extra-biblical source is *rntn* or *rptn*, which so far cannot be identified with any known site.

Acknowledgements

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