An Edomite Ostracon from Horvat 'Uza

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AN EDOMITE OSTRACON FROM ḤORVAT 'UZA

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During the second season of excavation at Ḥorvat 'Uza in the eastern Negev,[1] a complete, though not intact (broken into four pieces), ostracon was discovered on the floor of the front chamber of the fortress gatehouse. The ostracon, which proved to be of Edomite origin, was found in an Israelite stratum datable to the end of the 7th–beginning of the 6th centuries B.C.E., in which several Hebrew ostraca were also unearthed.

The ostracon, as restored, measures 9.5 × 11.5 cm. It is inscribed with six lines of text in a large, widely spaced script. Almost all the words are separated from one another by a dot. Most of the inscription can be read, although a few letters in lines 1, 4 and 6 are either too blurred or too faint to be legible, partly because of surface flaking (Fig. 1; Pl. 12:2).[2]
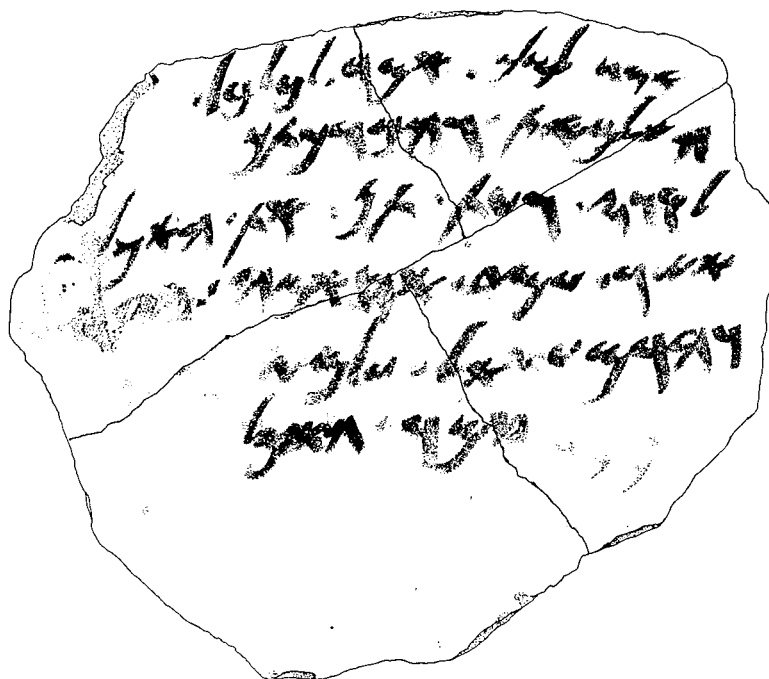

Fig. 1. Facsimile of the ostracon.

Transcription

1. *'mr. lmlk. 'mr. lblbl.*	.1 אמֹ. למלך אמר. לבלבל.
2. *hšlm. 't. whbrktk*	.2 השלם. את. והברכתך
3. *lqws. w't. tn. 't. h'kl*	.3 לקוס. ועת. תן. את. האכל
4. *'šr. 'md. 'h'mh* [ ]	.4 אשר. עמד. אחאמה [ ]
5. *whrm '[z]'l. 'l mž[bḥ(?)...]*	.5 והרם ענ[ז]אל. על מז[בח(?)...]
6. [ ] *ḥmr. h'kl*	.6 [ ] חמר. האכל

Translation

1. (Thus) said Lumalak (or \<E> limelek): Say to *Blbl!*
2. Are you well? I bless you
3. by Qaus. And now give the food (grain)
4. that Aḥi'ma/ o...
5. And may U[z]iel lift [it] upon (the altar?)...
6. [lest] the food become leavened(?)

Line 1

'mr lmlk. In the first word, the *'alef* and the head of the *mem* are quite clear, but the third letter is too faint to be easily decipherable. However, the upper part of it could have belonged to a *resh,* and so the reading may be completed as *'mr lmlk,* which is a conventional epistolary opening formula (Naveh 1979:28–29). *Lmlk* could also be a personal name (Lumalak), as suggested by Naveh (see *KAI:* No. 203), or perhaps Elimelek with the *'alef* elided for phonetic reasons.

'mr lblbl. Blbl as a personal name has no parallel either in the Bible or in any other Hebrew literary source. The name *blbl* may mean a kind of a bird, as in Arabic *bulbul.* Personal names from the animal kingdom are common in the Bible, as for instance, Zippor ('bird'), father of Balak, king of Moab (Num. 22:2), and Oreb ('crow') and Zeeb ('wolf'), who were Midianite officials (Judg. 7:25; see also *Enc. Miqr. VIII:* col. 42). *Blbl* might also be an alternative form of the name *Bnb'l* (see Benz 1972:89; 287–288; on the interchangeability of *lamed* and *nun,* see *ibid.:*205). Accordingly, line 1 can be read thus : *'mr lmlk 'mr lblbl* (Thus says/said *Lmlk:* Say to *Blbl*), with the first *'mr* either a perfect or a participle and the second one in the imperative.

Lines 2–3

hšlm 't. These words are part of the greeting formula. They also appear in a biblical context: "השלום אתה אחי"(2 Sam. 20:9), "Art thou in health, my brother?" or, "Is it well with you, my brother?" Similar although not identical phrases are known in various Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions. See, for example, the inscription on a pithos from Kuntillet 'Ajrud: "השלם אֹת[ן] ברכתך ליהוה","Is it well with you? I bless you by Yahweh" (Chase 1982).

At the end of line 2 there are vestiges of faintly visible letters. Apparently the scribe continued to write here, but realizing there was not enough space left for a complete word in his widely spaced script, he erased (although imperfectly) the letters he had already written and continued on the line below. (The same occurred at the end of line 4.)

whbrktk lqws. Having inquired about the health and well-being of his addressee, the writer of the letter invokes the blessing of the Edomite god Qaus on him. Similar benedictory

formulae are found in the Bible (Gen. 27:7) and other sources, e.g., the Arad ostraca, where the formula reads *brktk lyhwh* (Aharoni 1981: Nos. 16, 21, 40) and also in the Phoenician papyrus from Saqqara, where it reads *brktk lb'lspn (KAI:* No. 50; Naveh 1979:29). In this common benedictory formula employed in Hebrew, Phoenician and Aramaic, the root *brk* is in *pi'el,* whereas on our ostracon the verbal form is *hiph'il.* Evidently the latter is an Edomite trait.

Following the opening and greeting formulae comes *w't* ('and now'), which introduces the body of the letter. The next words, *tn 't h'kl* ('issue/supply the food') constitute the main message of the letter, bidding the recipient to deliver a consignment of food into the hands of the messenger(s). Similar delivery instructions in the second person imperative occur frequently in the Arad letters, e.g., *w't tn mn hyyn,* "now issue from the wine" (Aharoni 1981: No.3), and *tn lktym,* "give the Kittiyim" *(ibid.:* No. 4). In biblical Hebrew the word *'kl* usually means 'grain' (cf. Hab. 3,17: "And the cornfield shall not bear grain"); see also the Ammonite ostracon from Heshbon (Cross 1975: No. 4) and the Ugaritic text RS 19.4 *(PRU:* 114).

Line 4

'md. The three letters of this word are clearly legible, but the identification of the last one is difficult. Their context suggests that *'md* is a verbal form, meaning 'prepare/arrange/allocate' (amounts of grain). However, there is no comparative or supportive evidence for this explication, and our interpretation must remain conjectural.

'h'mh. If the reading is correct, then we have here a personal name, Aḥi'imō or Aḥi'imā, which means "his (or her) mother's brother." This form does not appear in the Bible, but does occur in a West Semitic seal as *'hmh* and in an Akkadian text as Aḫi-immišu *(Enc. Miqr. I:* col. 195; Bordveuil and Lemaire 1976:48; cf. *KAI* 209, where the correct reading is not אחמה but אחסה; Naveh 1970:12).

Line 5

whrm. The reading of this word is quite clear, and its meaning is to 'lift up'. It may be that in the broader context of the inscription it denotes an action connected with the handing over of grain, i.e. "to deliver or load (the grain)." However, it could also be interpreted, as Naveh has suggested, as to raise an offering (see Lev. 2:9), particularly if the restoration of the last word of this line as 'altar' is correct (see below).

'[z]'l. This word had four letters, but only the first and last are legible. The second letter has no vertical strokes that project either upwards or downwards, and its parallel diagonal strokes could be those of a *zayin.* On the third letter the upper diagonal stroke of an *'alef* is clearly visible; however, its bottom diagonal and its cross-stroke are badly faded. It is therefore not without hesitation that we suggest reading an *'alef* in this place. Thus a plausible reading of the word would be 'Uziel, a theophoric name that appears both in the Bible and on seals (see *Enc.Miqr. VI:* cols. 124–125). The abbreviated form, 'Uza, of this name is apparently more common in extra-biblical writings *(ibid.:* cols. 112–113).

'l mż[bḥ]. The first two letters could be read as על, a preposition meaning 'upon'. The third letter is definitely a *mem,* and the fourth might possibly be a *zayin.* The letters at the end of the line are almost completely obliterated, but if we restore a *bet* and a *ḥet,* we would have the word מזבח ('altar').

Line 6

ḥmr h'kl. The word *ḥmr* ('seethe, foam, froth') in this context could be interpreted as meaning 'leavened', as in the Aramaic חמירא, חמיר. The word, which seems to have a connotation similar to that of חמץ ('to be leavened, to become sour, ferment'), appears in Ps. 75:8, *wyyn ḥmr ml' msk.*

The biblical usage of the perfect with future intent occurs also in our letter. Hence the word *'kl* could be construed here as meaning dough that has not yet become leavened (cf. Exod. 12:34: "And the people took their dough before it was leavened").

Apparently the dough was intended for baking bread by an army unit encamped under field conditions or on the march, with no facilities (or time) to prepare dough on the spot. An ostracon with similar content is found among the Arad letters (Aharoni 1981: No. 3), where Eliashiv, the commander of the fortress, is instructed to send (a consignment of) dough to Beer-sheba. However, since the last legible word in line 5 is cut off from the first legible word in line 6, this interpretation must remain conjectural.

Summing up, the content of this letter is clear enough, notwithstanding the difficulty of reading and interpreting lines 4 and 5: this is an instruction issued by a high Edomite official to *Blbl,* apparently a high-ranking officer in an Edomite fort at 'Uza or elsewhere in the Negev, to supply a quantity of food — perhaps dough — to the messenger(s) bearing the inscribed ostracon. As shown above, the opening formula of the letter comprises the salutation and invocation of the god Qaus' blessing on the commander. Although the end of the message is not entirely clear, this does not affect the contents as a whole.

Palaeography and morphology

Some of the letters of the ostracon differ from the usual Hebrew letter forms, although they are identical to the script of the ostraca from Tell el-Kheleifeh, Buseirah and Umm el-Biyara, which shows Aramaic influence. The distinctive characteristics of the Edomite script were first noted by Naveh (1966:28–30) in his discussion of Ostracon 6053 from Tell el-Kheleifeh. Naveh (1966; 1982:102–105) assumes that the Hebrew script was adopted by the Edomites at the time their kingdom was first established, but later, around the 8th century B.C.E., it was modified under the influence of the Aramaic script, which entered the region in the wake of the Assyrian conquests. It is therefore a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic elements.

Since all the Edomite inscriptions discovered to date are short and fragmentary, our Edomite ostracon from Horvat 'Uza with its relatively complete text is of particular importance. The script is distinctly Edomite in character. While the stance of the letters and a few of the letter forms are similar to those of the Hebrew script, most of its letters, especially the open *bet, 'ayin and resh,* as well as the forms of the *waw, samekh and taw,* closely resemble those of the Aramaic script. The *he* resembles a mirror-image R (9). Apparently this particular form of the *he,* along with the large-headed *mem,* are specific to the Edomite script (Fig. 2).

In its language, structure and style the letter bears a strong resemblance to comtemporary Hebrew epistolary inscriptions that have become known to us recently. Blessings like those in the opening formula and the use of the imperative are well known in the Bible and extra-biblical literature of the period (see commentary to lines 2–3), indicating a close linguistic and stylistic affinity between Hebrew and Edomite. On the other hand, the specifically Edomite character of the letter may be indicated by the use of the *hiph'il* form of the verb *brk* instead of

the *pi'el* form usual in Hebrew, Phoenician and Aramaic. The mention of the god Qaus, the national deity of Edom, is, of course, the most obvious evidence of the Edomite origin of the letter.

Fig. 2. Script of Hebrew ostracon from Arad, Stratum VI (rows 1 and 3), as compared to script of the Edomite ostracon from Horvat 'Uza (rows 2 and 4).

Edomite presence in the Negev

The discovery of this Edomite ostracon at Ḥorvat 'Uza constitutes significant evidence in favour of an Edomite presence, in one guise or another, at this Judean fortress, which seems to have fallen into the hands of the Edomites around the time of the Babylonian conquest of Judah. Although the Edomite seal of Qosa and a sherd with some letters were found at Tel 'Aro'er (Biran and Cohen 1976:139; Pl. 28:B; Biran 1982:162; Pl. 23 B; Naveh, forthcoming), the ostracon furnishes the first clear and direct historical evidence for Edomite penetration into the Negev (Bartlett 1972; Aharoni 1981:146–147), which otherwise is only hinted at in the Bible (2Kgs. 24:2; Ezek. 35:6) and in the Arad letters (*ibid.*:146–147; No. 24). Aside from these written sources, there is also the evidence of Edomite pottery at late Iron Age sites in the region (e.g., Tell Malḥata, Tel 'Ira, Tel 'Aro'er, Tel 'Arad and Tel Masos). Recently what appears to be an Edomite temple was discovered at Ḥorvat Qitmit, south of Tel 'Arad (*Had. Arch.* 85 [1984] : 45). Its discovery adds considerably to the weight of evidence for an Edomite presence in the region during this period. However, the historical implications of these finds will be dealt with in another article.

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