

An Ostrakon in Literary Hebrew from Ḥorvat ‘Uza¹

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In 1993, Itzhak Beit-Arieh published an important and interesting Hebrew ostrakon from his excavations at Ḥorvat ‘Uza in the eastern Negev. In addition to his own readings, Beit-Arieh added as an appendix to his paper, my readings and translation of the ostrakon (Beit-Arieh 1993:64–65). I repeat here my transcription and translation together with my own drawing and some additional notes and comments.

TRANSCRIPTION:

1. ²*m* *bšly* *bmšr* [
2. *lšn*[?] *th wlgdl*² *y* [
3. *hnh lšnth* [
4. *w³ml³ yr³ k(?)l(?)* [
5. [] *dk yšqlk* [*h*
6. [] *š(?)l⁴ ly[...]* *h* [
7. *‘l m* [] *wys^c bkyt*⁴ *šbtkh* [
8. *w^cllt ys^c* [
9. *‘l pn[ykh] wht^cr^crth* [⁵
10. *bdnt*
11. *y(?)mhš*⁶ *zr^ctykh* [] *bpl^cš* [⁷
12. *‘šr ymt.*⁸ *whyh tr[‘lh?]*⁹ *w[r]‘š*
13. *wqbrkh hrb*¹⁰

¹ In homage to James Sauer, *facile princeps* in Jordanian archaeology.

² I read here *wlgdl* not *‘lgdl*. See my drawing.

³ The *‘alep* of *yr³* is clear. I do not think either *ydt* or *ydk* is likely.

⁴ The reading *wys^c bkyt* seems clear to me. See my drawing.

⁵ In my opinion, *wht^cr^crth* is certain and appears both on Yardeni’s drawing and mine.

⁶ [] *mhš* is clear on the ostrakon. The *zayin* of *zr^ctykh* is less than clear.

⁷ Cf. Psalm 37:17, etc.

⁸ *‘šr* is to be taken in its Arabic sense.

⁹ The end of the line is difficult. *tr* [is clear enough and at the end of the line]‘š. A tentative suggestion is to read *tr[‘lh] w[r]‘šr* ‘reeling and shattering.’

¹⁰ The final word is probably *hrb*, ‘desolate’. *šrb*, ‘parched ground’ or ‘shimmering desert’, is also possible.

TRANSLATION:

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 period of 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 shattering (?) [
13. and your grave will be desolate.

I suspect that this ostrakon is the end of a longer literary text, the first portion appearing in another column or sherd. The literary character of the text is apparent from its structure and vocabulary. The particles *‘m* and *‘ml³* point to either/or alternatives, in the first case benign (quietude and safety), in the latter case malign (all manner of trouble ending in a desolate grave). It is reminiscent of prophetic discourse.

The language is literary Hebrew, one of the few surviving pieces from preexilic Israel.¹¹ A salient marker of this literary character is the use of the formal (long) suffixes on nouns and verbs: *šbtkh* (line 7), *wht^cr^crth* (line 9), *zr^ctykh* (line 11) and *wqbrkh*. Evidently the author was consistent, and we should reconstruct *yšqlk[h]* in line 5 and *pn[ykh]* in line 9. The explanation of the long and short forms of the pronouns (found rarely in the Masoretic Text, quite frequently

¹¹ I have argued (Cross 1970) that the Ḥirbat Bayt Layy Inscription is a literary text, and has the literary suffix *-kā(h)* (*‘thykh*) in its first line.

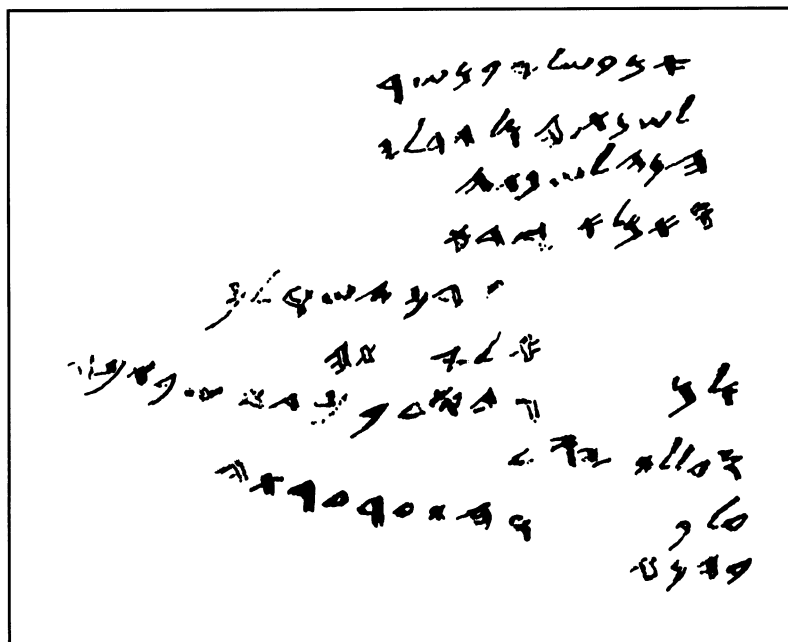


Fig. 1. The Horvat 'Uza ostrakon, lines 1-10.

the literary form *-kā*. The literary suffix of the second feminine singular suffix *-kî* (כִּי-) on the contrary is not chosen by the Masoretes who prefer the vernacular *-ek* (עֵק-). A similar analysis applies to the verbal suffixes. The Masoretes prefer the literary *-tā* written anomalously תָּ- although a form such as תתתה is frequent. The manuscripts from Qumrân exhibit some pseudoformal orthographies, some hypercorrections, pseudo-cohortatives, and the like, to be sure, but they also witness to a literary language largely lost in the consonantal text chosen in the Rabbinic Recension and pointed by the Masoretes.

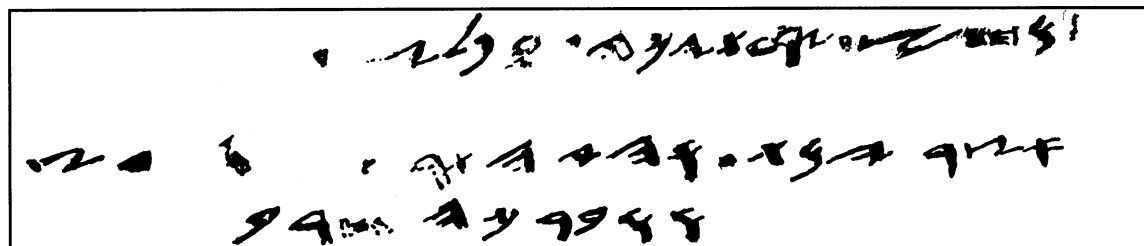


Fig. 2. The Horvat 'Uza ostrakon, lines 11-13.

in Qumrân biblical manuscripts, in the second column of Origen's Hexapla, in Jerome's Latin transcriptions, in various biblical and liturgical manuscripts with Palestinian punctuation, and in Samaritan sources) which we sketched in 1952 is fully borne out by this new material.¹² All final vowels are marked in preexilic orthography. When we find the second masculine singular suffix written תְּ- it was pronounced *-ak*. When the literary form *-kā* is meant, it is written תְּכִי-. The anomalous writing of the Masoretes תְּ- is actually a kind of *qêrê*. The manuscript (*kêtib*) reads *-ak* (תְּ-), the Masoretes correct to

Interestingly enough, I find no clear instance of the article or *ʾet*, again pointing to the literary or even poetic character of the 'Uza text.¹³ Note also the use of the literary form *ymt* in line 12.

The scribe has written in a skilled Hebrew cursive that stands palaeographically between the Yabneh-yam Ostrakon of ca. 625 BCE and the Lachish Letters. Indeed the script is closer to that of the Lachish Letters and the ostraca of Arad Stratum VII-VI at the beginning of the sixth century BCE. Note the dropped right shoulder of *mem* and the mixture of tailed and tailless *yods*. A date about 600 BCE cannot be far wrong.

¹² See Cross and Freedman (1952) 65-70; Cross 1992:3-6. An expanded version of my comments here may be found in Cross 1995:174-77.

¹³ See most recently Anderson and Forbes 1983:165-83.

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