

A FURTHER READING FOR THE HOBAB INSCRIPTION FROM SINAI

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In the Spring 1987 issue of *AUSS* I examined the important Proto-Sinaitic inscription discovered in 1960 by Georg Gerster.¹ This inscription is located a considerable distance west of the other Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions which cluster around the mines at Serabit el-Khadem.² Both by its location and by its contents it appears quite distinct from the usual mining inscriptions or dedications written in this script. Its unusual and distinct nature led to my suggestion that it should not be related to the Semitic miners who worked for the Egyptians in the mines at Serabit, but rather that it should be connected historically with the Israelites who took up residence in Sinai after they left Egypt at the time of the Exodus.

1. *Previous Interpretation*

In my previous essay, the letters and lines of this inscription were read from top to bottom and from left to right. The reading of a number of the letters in this inscription had actually been agreed upon by the scholars who had treated it previously,³ and readings for the letters at the bottom of each column and the top of the fourth column were added in my article. This yielded the following transcription:⁴

¹W. H. Shea, "New Light on the Exodus and on Construction of the Tabernacle: Gerster's Protosinaitic Inscription No. 1," *AUSS* 25 (1987): 73-96.

²For the location of this inscription in comparison to the other mining and dedicatory inscriptions at Serabit, see the maps on p. 74 of *ibid.*

³See the table of comparison of previous readings of the inscription on p. 79 of *ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 83.

Column I	Column II	Column III	Column IV
W	T	ʾA	R
L	W	D	K
ʾA	H	Y	R
D	B		
	B		

Putting these letters and their words in order by rotating their lines and dividing their words yielded the following text:⁵

wlʿdt wḥbb ʾdyr kr

This was translated as follows:⁶

“Now for the congregation and Hobab, mighty is the furnace.”

2. Further Analysis

All of the readings for the letters of this inscription stand correct, and the translation of them is essentially correct; but one word in the translation must now be qualified—namely, the last one, the word for “furnace.” The question has already been raised in previous studies as to whether or not there were additional letters written below the head of the second *reš* at the bottom of the fourth column. It is reasonably clear that there was a horizontal bar below that head (see figure 1), and regarding this I commented in my previous study that “the horizontal bar at the bottom of Column IV looks more like a marker which demarcates the end of the inscription than it does like another letter.”⁷ Reexamination of this inscription has led me to a revision of this opinion, and I now agree with those scholars who have argued that there was another letter where this bar occurs.

A. F. Rainey proposed that a *beth* should be reconstructed here.⁸ That opinion is correct, since it matches the traces found in the rock. He read this column from bottom to top, however, and therefore interpreted this letter as the first consonant in the word

⁵Ibid., p. 84.

⁶Ibid., p. 85. I should have made the predicate adjectival relationship clearer in my previous translation.

⁷Ibid., p. 84.

⁸A. F. Rainey, “Notes on Some Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions,” *IEJ* 25 (1975): 106-116. See pp. 106-111 for Gerster No. 1, and especially p. 107 for the line drawing of this inscription with the damaged letter at the bottom of the right-hand column.

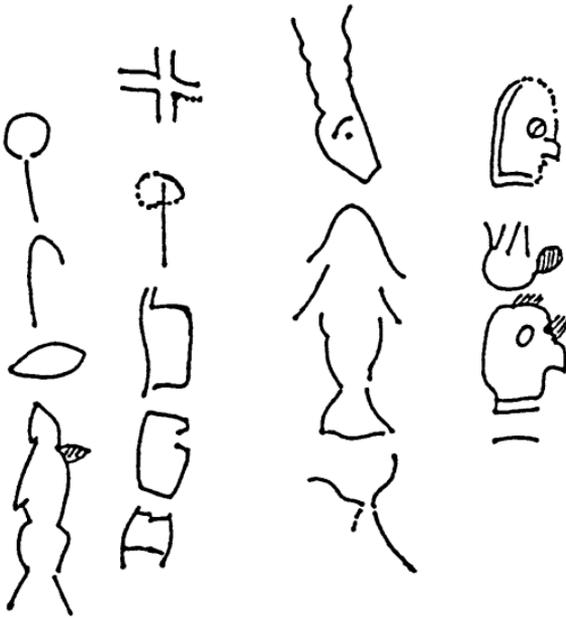


Figure 1. Old Line Drawing

for blessings, *brkt*. M. Dijkstra, on the other hand, has read this letter as a *nun*.⁹ While I do not agree that Dijkstra is correct, his variant view illustrates the fact that there is diversity of opinion in reading this letter.

The line drawing which accompanies Rainey's study on this Proto-Sinaitic text is particularly helpful, for it illustrates not only the horizontal bar but also a vertical bar on the right and the traces of a vertical bar on the left. If this configuration had been enclosed with another horizontal bar at the bottom, it would have made up the box or rectangle that illustrates the house-shaped sign which was used, on the acrophonic principle, for the *b* in *beth*. The three strokes that do occur in the rock, even if surviving alone, would fit best—and probably fit only—with the *b* in the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet.

⁹M. Dijkstra, "Notes on Some Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions Including an Unrecognized Inscription of Wadi Rod el 'Air," *UF* 15 (1983): 35-36.



Figure 2. New Line Drawing

My reexamination of the photograph of this inscription makes it now appear that the bottom line of the *beth* is present and that this letter can be read more clearly than was previously appreciated (see figure 2). The horizontal line at the top is clear. Only faint traces of the vertical line on the left remain, but on the right there is a rather clear and deeply incised vertical line. That line on the right does not reach, however, all the way up to touch the horizontal line at the top. As it goes down the face of the rock, it becomes deeper; and indeed, a chip has come out of the rock at the corner where this letter's line turns left. This deepness, due to the chipping, is probably the reason for the failure to identify the line as part of a letter, for the chipping makes the line look like simply another natural groove in the rock. But that such is not the case is evident from the sharp angle of the corner that is present. From it the deep horizontal line at the bottom of this letter extends to the right.

There may well be a reason why the vertical line on the right does not extend all the way up to the horizontal line at the top. When one compares this letter, proposed as a *beth*, with the first *beth* in the second column, it becomes evident that the vertical line on the right of that rectangle does not go all the way up to meet the top horizontal line either. The probable reason for this is that this open space was left to represent the door in the house-sign used for this letter.

The foregoing observations and comparisons make it seem reasonably clear that there is indeed another letter at the bottom of column IV and that that letter is a *beth*. I would now propose, however, that there is not just one additional letter at the bottom of this column, but two. Below the square box of the *beth* and beginning a considerable distance to its right is a wavy horizontal line. Again, the probable reason why this has not previously been recognized as a letter is that it is cut so deeply into the rock—more deeply than the other letters, which were only scratched on the surface. This wavy line runs into a groove in the rock, at a place where the rock has been chipped out or fallen out. The wavy line, however, emerges and continues to the left from this groove, and there it is more superficial, like the other letters in the inscription. The wavy-line letter of the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet was the *m*, taken from the representation of *mayim* or water. The last letter in this column is therefore a *mem*.

I previously read the main word in this column as *kr*, which I interpreted as referring to a *kûr* or “furnace.”¹⁰ This, in turn, was taken to refer to the smelter that must have been used in the area, as evidenced by the very large heap of slag found in the floor of the valley of the Wadi Naşb. Since Hobab came from the tribe of Kenites, a tribe of metalsmiths, his connection with such activities made a logical link to the biblical account of similar activities during the Israelite stay in Sinai. That link can still be maintained, but it should be modified into a slightly different form on the basis of the new readings for the two additional letters at the bottom of column IV. The word that is present here should now be read as *krbm*.

In the singular, *krb* occurs 25 times in Biblical Hebrew, with the meaning of “cherub.” It occurs more frequently in the dual or

¹⁰Shea, p. 89.

plural form of *krbm* (65 times), with the meaning of “cherubs” (or using the transliterated Hebrew ending, as “cherubim”). That is the word which can be identified in its dual or plural form at the end of the inscription. As can be seen from the description of the production of the cherubim in Exod 25:18-22 and 36:8, 35 and 37:7-9, the same type of metal work that was involved in the construction of other parts of the sanctuary was also involved in the production of the cherubim. The metal was different, since gold was involved in their production in contrast to the bronze that I discussed in my earlier study.¹¹

This difference in metals need not, however, disconnect this Proto-Sinaitic inscription from the smelting area in the valley below it, for one may reasonably expect that all of the different metals that went into the construction of the sanctuary were worked in the same area. On the basis of the slag heap left behind from the bronze (copper) worked here, one would expect that this should have been the area where the cherubim were made too.

With the word for “cherubim” identified at the end of this inscription, the question arises as to how this word relates to the foregoing portion of the inscription. The immediately preceding word is ³*adîr*, all the letters of which can be read with a reasonable degree of security. This is a word which can be used either as an adjective meaning “mighty, majestic, glorious,” or as a noun meaning “the Mighty One, the Majestic One, the Glorious One.” The question then is, Which of these uses is involved in this inscription?

The phrase ³*adyr krbm* might be taken to mean “mighty (are) the cherubim” by interpreting ³*adyr* as a predicate adjective. This will not fit, however, as the predicate adjective should agree with its subject in terms of number, whereas here we would have a singular followed by a plural. If the word is not an adjective, then it should be taken as a noun. And if it is a noun, then it should stand in construct with the word for cherubim which follows it. Thus we have here either “The Mighty One of the cherubim,” referring to God, or “the mighty one of the cherubim,” referring to some other object associated with these cherubim. If it is the latter, then the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat on the Ark, or the sanctuary as a whole would come to mind from biblical parallels.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 90-91.

The decision between the two possibilities is difficult to make, but it seems more likely that the reference here is to the God who dwelt between the cherubim, rather than to some other object associated with the cherubim in the sanctuary. At any rate, either interpretation makes a significant connection between the sanctuary and the God who dwelt there among the cherubim.

The word ²*adîr* could be used to describe objects, such as the "lordly" bowl with which Yael served Sisera (Judg 5:25), so its use to refer to some piece of equipment in the sanctuary related to the cherubim would have been suitable. It was also used as a noun for human "nobles" (Judg 5:13, 2 Chr 23:20, etc.) and as an adjective with which to describe such persons (Ps 136:18). It was used, as well, for God (Ps 8:2) and for describing various aspects of His person (Ps 8:1, 9; 76:5; 93:4). It is of interest to note that the Philistines referred to the God of the Israelites by use of this word in a context which involved the Ark of the Covenant and in which reference was made to events at the time of the Exodus (1 Sam 4:8).

Of special interest here are the three uses of this root in the old poem of the Song of the Sea, set after the victory over Pharaoh and his hosts and just before Israel entered Sinai, where the inscription here under consideration was written. In its first occurrence, this word was used to describe God's right hand with which He gained the victory (Exod 15:6). In the second instance, it referred to the "mighty" waters which buried Pharaoh's hosts in the depths (v. 10). And in the third and final instance, it was used to refer to God Himself (v. 11). Thus it would be quite appropriate to find this word in an Israelite inscription in Sinai as referring to the God who brought the Israelites there.

3. *Revised Interpretation*

From the foregoing attention given to the final phrase of this Proto-Sinaitic inscription we may turn to the overall translation of the text. To the first phrase, *wl^cdt wḥbb*, "Now for the congregation and Hobab," can be added this final phrase, "The Mighty One of the cherubim." Together the entire statement can be translated, "Now for the congregation and Hobab (is) The Mighty One of the cherubim." Reversing the phraseology for smoother English, we would read this as "The Mighty One of the cherubim is for the congregation and Hobab." Or, paraphrasing a bit more freely, we might well read as follows: "The Mighty One who resides between

the cherubim is for the congregation of Israel and Hobab." The essence of the statement which is elaborated in this way is simply that "our God is for us."

The question next arises, Why was such an inscription inscribed in its locale precisely at that time? A connection with the work of smelting objects for the Israelite sanctuary was previously posited as the occasion, and that connection should be maintained. As a matter of fact, the connection can now be made more specific, for we find that we have reference to the cherubim which were a part of the work of preparing and constructing the sanctuary. Thus, this inscription probably was incised upon the completion of the construction or preparation of the cherubim for the sanctuary. (It could, of course, have been incised as early as when the instruction was given concerning their preparation, though it seems more likely that it would have been incised to commemorate the completion of their forms.) The credit for the accomplishment, however, was not, from the Israelite perspective, to be given just to the cherubim themselves or to the workmen who made them, but was above all to be given to the God who was to dwell among the cherubim when the sanctuary was complete. He was indeed the "Mighty One"—that same Mighty One who had brought them out of Egypt and into this place where they could prepare His sanctuary.

This inscription still carries with it the same implications that I outlined in my previous discussion of it.¹² These pertain to the route of the Exodus, the location of Mount Sinai, the date of the Exodus, the time of inscribing the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, and our knowledge of the construction of the sanctuary. It is this last point in particular that is now made more specific through the determination that this inscription refers to the cherubim which were to go into that sanctuary. Making this point more specific simply reinforces the other historical conclusions that have been drawn from this important inscription.

¹²Ibid., pp. 92-94.