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The Tel Zayit Inscription (What's New in Archaeology)

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Michael Hasel

The sands of the Middle East often reveal secrets long lost through the passage of time. It is the alluring hope of discovery that brings back hundreds of archaeologists and volunteers to the lands of the Bible every year from colleges and universities around the world. The hope is that, underneath the layers of accumulation, hints will be found that will somehow illuminate and inspire. Such a discovery was made during the summer of 2005 when excavators at the site of Tel Zayit in Israel uncovered a wall with a stone protruding from it. That stone would challenge recent scholars and their skeptical assessment of early Israel.

Early one morning, a volunteer was brushing away the dirt from a stone wall when she noticed something different. A stone was strangely protruding from the face of the wall. As the volunteer glanced at it from different angles she wondered why it would be placed in such an awkward position. Then she noticed that

THE TEL ZAYIT INSCRIPTION

something was scratched on the surface. She called over her supervisors, and it was not long before the elusive markings were recognized. They were the letters of an ancient script buried for more than 2,900 years. Someone in the ancient past had marked down the alphabet on that ancient stone. Today excavators believe that the abecedary, or alphabet, may be the most ancient precursor to the Hebrew alphabet, the basis for the language of the Old Testament.

Today when numerous postmodern scholars have challenged the validity of the biblical record, this is an important discovery. Some scholars have actually questioned the existence of David and Solomon as historical figures. These so-called revisionists are rewriting the Bible and presuming a much later date for its origin.

According to Philip Davies of the University of Sheffield, the Bible was not written until the Hellenistic period after Alexander the Great,

some 600 years after the time of David and Solomon. He asserts, further, that biblical Hebrew was an invented language, a construct of this period. But he does not cite any supporting evidence for his assertion because there is none.

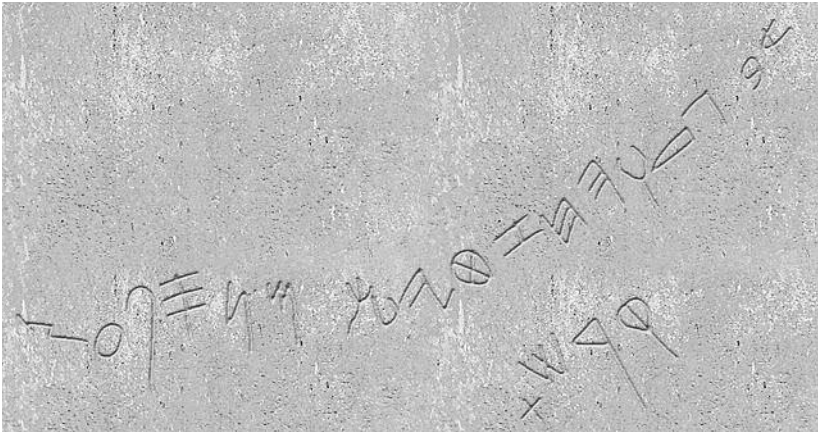
Inscriptions have been found from sites throughout Israel from the time of the 10th century B.C. onward. Most of these inscriptions have not been found in a clear archaeological context. That is, they often have been found in a dump after excavation and thus, a secure date based on pottery typology has

not been possible. Nevertheless, they provide important details concerning the development of the Hebrew alphabet and language.

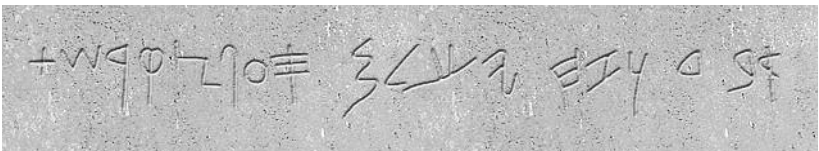
One such find was made at the site of Gezer, a city I had the privilege of excavating several years ago. In the early excavations of the site, R. A. S. Macalister found a small tablet of soft limestone with the following inscription on it:

Two months of harvest
Two months of planting
Two months of late planting
One month of hoeing

Tel Zayit Abecedary



Script of Gezer Calendar



One month of barley-harvest
One month of harvest and festival
Two months of grape harvesting
One month of summer fruit.

Scholars who have studied the Gezer calendar have thought that perhaps it was a schoolboy's exercise or a popular folk song. It certainly gives us insight on the agricultural calendar of the Israelites, who lived as an agrarian society. Professor Joseph Naveh of the Hebrew University writes that this is thought to be the earliest Hebrew inscription known to date.

The discovery of the Tel Zayit abecedary adds significantly to this understanding. The inscription is dated by the ceramic and archaeological evidence to the 10th century, the time of Solomon or shortly thereafter. The building was destroyed in a massive fire, leaving debris nearly one meter thick over the area. Excavators have dated this destruction to Shishak, Zerah the Ethiopian (who may have acted as an agent of Shishak), or possibly someone else. If the destruction dates to Shishak, whose campaign is mentioned in 1 Kings 14:25-28 (2 Chron. 12:1-12), then the inscription would need to be dated before 925 B.C., when this campaign took place, according to Egyptian rec-

ords. The clear archaeological context of this inscription cannot be overstated. The Tel Zayit inscription helps to provide a chronological anchor to many of the studies conducted on the development of the Hebrew script.

The Tel Zayit abecedary is one of the oldest attestations of the alphabet known. Since it was found in a clear archaeological context that dates it to the 10th century B.C., the abecedary also provides a clear connection between the development of language in ancient Israel and the growing archaeological evidence of cities and buildings.

We can be certain that Hebrew was not an invented language of the third century B.C. Hellenistic period to be written only by the priests and elite citizens of Jerusalem. The writing of the Hebrew language was even practiced in the smaller cities of Judah hundreds of years earlier.

It also means that the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles, which provide the political history of Israel, could indeed have been based on earlier sources and writings that documented the events of the ancient Hebrew kings. The Bible was written in the ancient past and is not the creation of scribes and priests inventing their history hundreds of years after the event.

