

A POTENTIAL BIBLICAL CONNECTION FOR THE BETH SHEMESH OSTRACON

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An intriguing six-line ostracon was found by Elihu Grant in his excavations at Ain Shems more than half a century ago.¹ Since the site that he excavated has commonly been identified with biblical Beth Shemesh, this text has been identified as the Beth Shemesh Ostracon.

This ostracon has been the subject of a number of studies;² but until very recently its text has resisted complete decipherment. E. Puech's analysis, published in 1986—as a part of his study of the early development of the alphabet—represents a real breakthrough in understanding it.³ Puech's treatment presents a more firmly established text and also a translation with which to work in suggesting further connections with the history of the inhabitants in the vicinity of Beth Shemesh in the late second millennium B.C.

The present study suggests one way in which this text may be related to two persons who are located by a biblical narrative in this place and time. Before my suggestion on this is presented, however, the text of the ostracon should be described.

1. *The Text of the Ostracon*

According to Puech's new analysis, the Beth Shemesh Ostracon text is a short and straightforward record of the disbursement of

¹Elihu Grant, *Ain Shems Excavations*, vol. 1 (Haverford, PA, 1931), pl. X.

²H. Grimme, "Die altkanaanäische Buchstabenschrift zwischen 1500 und 1250 v. Chr.," *AfO* 10 (1935-1936): 270-277; S. Yeivin, "The Palestino-Sinaitic Inscriptions," *PEFQS* (July 1937): 180-193; B. Maisler, "Zur Urgeschichte des phönizisch-hebräischen Alphabets," *JPOS* 18 (1938): 278, 281, 289; F. M. Cross, "The Origin and Early Evolution of the Alphabet," *Eretz-Israel* 8 (1967): 17-19; J. Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet* (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 35-36.

³E. Puech, "Origine de l'alphabet," *RB* 93 (1986): 161-213.

eight (or eighty)⁴ baths of wine to five individuals. Three of these persons are named on the front side of the sherd, and the other two are named on the back side. Reference to the total of eight (or eighty) baths of wine, *bt yn*, is made in the line at the bottom of the front side of the sherd. (For Puech's drawing of both the front and back sides of the sherd, see Figures 1 and 2 page 260.)

The Personal Names in the Text

The number of baths involved is indicated by a circle of eight round dots located above this summary line. The next two lines of the text read upwards and from left to right. These lines contain two of the personal names in the text. A round dot was placed above each of these names to indicate that these persons each received one bath (or ten). Another name was written vertically along the edge of the sherd, but this name cannot be read because most of it is broken away. There is, however, another round dot above this name, indicating that the designated person received the same amount of wine.

Two more personal names were written on the reverse side of the sherd. Four dots appear above one of these names, and one dot appears above the other of them, indicating that the two individuals named here received four (or forty) and one (or ten) baths of wine, respectively. The total number of dots written with the personal names equals the number of dots written over the baths of wine in the first line on the front side, and thus the bookkeeper's account balanced.

Some of the personal names in this text had been identified previously, but Puech has made some improvements upon those previous readings. In particular, he has demonstrated that the name on the reverse side which was previously read as *gm^εn* should now be read as *šm^εn* and translated as Simeon. The vertical zigzag line that was previously read as a *gimmel* can be clearly recognized as a *shin* when it is rotated 90° to bring it into a horizontal stance.

As for some of the other letters in the text, the *taw*, the *yod*, and the *nun* in the third line of the obverse are all clear, with only the *beth* in this line being in doubt. Once it is realized, however,

⁴The possible variant here and throughout the ostrakon text with regard to the quantity of wine depends on how certain circular markers in the inscription are to be understood. Further explanation is afforded later in this article.

that this particular letter has been rotated 180°, identification of it is quite easy. Thus we have the expression *bt yn*.

All the letters in the second line can be identified without difficulty. The ladder shape of the *heth* reveals that it lies on its side, and the circle of the *ayin* is somewhat irregular, but these letters still present no problem in identification. Here, then, we have $\text{h}^{\text{c}}\text{z}$.

The top line on this side of the sherd begins with a circular but open *lamed*, and the rest of the letters in this line are the same as those in the next line, though with a reversal of the two basic components. This top line (or line 1) reads $\text{l}^{\text{c}}\text{z}^{\text{h}}$.

Along the edge of the sherd, only the topmost parts of the letters written there can be seen above the break, and only an *aleph* in the third position from the top can be identified with probability. Even the traces of these mutilated letters indicate, however, that the name given cannot be a duplicate of either of the other two names written on this obverse side of the sherd.

On the reverse side of the sherd, all the letters in the two names are clear. We have, respectively, $\text{šm}^{\text{c}}\text{n}$ and hnn .

A Reading of the Text

With the letters on the ostracon identified as above, this text can now be read in entirety as set forth below in transliteration and in English translation. For clarity, the third line should be read first, inasmuch as it mentions the commodity being dispersed. Next comes the first line, as is evident because it begins with the preposition "to." Then the personal name in the second line should be read, followed by the illegible name along the margin of the sherd. Finally, the two names on the reverse side of the sherd follow in order. This yields a text which can be transcribed in the following manner:

<i>Line 3:</i>	<i>bt yn</i>	8 (or 80)
<i>Line 1:</i>	$\text{l}^{\text{c}}\text{z}^{\text{h}}$	1 (or 10)
<i>Line 2:</i>	$\text{h}^{\text{c}}\text{z}$	1 (or 10)
<i>Margin:</i>	- - h^{c} -	1 (or 10)
<i>Line 5:</i>	$\text{šm}^{\text{c}}\text{n}$	4 (or 40)
<i>Line 6:</i>	<i>hnn</i>	1 (or 10)

The reason why the amounts—i.e., the baths of wine in each instance—are in question is that a circular sign commonly carried

