

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 *gmⁿ* should now be read as *šmⁿ* 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 *ḥz*.

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 *l^czḥ*.

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, *šm^cn* and *ḥnn*.

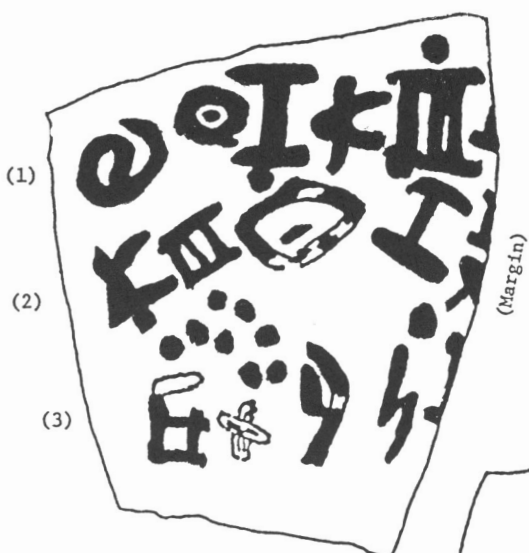
A Reading of the Text

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>	<i>l^czḥ</i>	1 (or 10)
<i>Line 2:</i>	<i>ḥz</i>	1 (or 10)
<i>Margin:</i>	- - ḥ -	1 (or 10)
<i>Line 5:</i>	<i>šm^cn</i>	4 (or 40)
<i>Line 6:</i>	<i>ḥnn</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

1. Obverse of the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon



2. Reverse of the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon

Figures 1 & 2. Line Drawings of the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon by E. Puech.
 From *Revue Biblique* 93 (1986):173. Reprinted by permission.

(Editor's Note: The two drawings have been rotated 90° counterclockwise from their position in the original publication).

the value of “ten,” whereas the value of “one” was more commonly represented by a vertical stroke. On this sherd, however, all of the numerical values are represented by circular dots, and no vertical strokes appear. This being the case, it is probable that the circular dots here represent units of one each, rather than representing tens. With this qualification, we can now translate the text as follows:

<i>Line 3:</i>	<i>baths of wine</i>	8
<i>Line 1:</i>	<i>to ^cUzzah</i>	1
<i>Line 2:</i>	<i>^ʔAh^cuz</i>	1
<i>Margin:</i>	<i>[- -]^ʔa[-]</i>	1
<i>Line 5:</i>	<i>Simeon</i>	4
<i>Line 6:</i>	<i>Hanun</i>	1

2. Comparison of the Ostrakon Text with Biblical Data

When Puech came to translate the names in the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon, he did so only for the two names on the reverse face of the sherd. The three names on the obverse (even the two unbroken ones) he left untranslated.

The Names “Simeon” and “Hanun”

Of the names which Puech translated, *šm^cn*—or “Simeon”—is the more striking of the two. This transcription of this name is, as Puech has noted, the earliest known extra-biblical occurrence of “Simeon,” a name also used for one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Its use in this ostrakon as a personal name would suggest that the tribe of Simeon was settled in the land by the time the text was written, and also indicates that this recipient of wine was an Israelite.

West Semitic names built upon the root *hnn*, “to be gracious,” were relatively common, both within and outside Israelite circles. Within Israelite circles it was more commonly compounded with the theophoric element *-yah* to make up the name of Hananiah, but it was also used without that element, and was even used both with and without it as by-forms for the name of the same individual (cf. Neh 7:2). Hanun, the king of Ammon in the time of David, was a non-Israelite who bore this name (2 Sam 10:1), as was Hanno of Gaza in the time of the Neo-Assyrian kings.⁵ Through Phoenician

⁵See *ANET*, pp. 282-285, 658.

mediation this name was transmitted to Carthage, and it eventually ended up being used there by the famous general Hannibal (= *hanni-baal*). Thus, there is nothing particularly distinctive about this name on the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon which would indicate whether the person who bore it was an Israelite or a non-Israelite. He could have been either.

The Two Legible Names on the Obverse of the Ostrakon

Interesting as the names Simeon and Hanun are, we are more interested here in the two legible names on the obverse of the sherd—the names that Puech did not translate or discuss.

Thanks, however, to Puech's efforts, these names can now be read quite clearly as $\zeta uz^{\zeta} ah$ and $^{\zeta} ah^{\zeta} uz$ —probably pronounced as $\zeta uz^{\zeta} ahi$ and $^{\zeta} ahi^{\zeta} uz$. They mean, respectively, "powerful is my brother," and "my brother is powerful." It is quite evident from even a brief glance at these names that they contain the same two elements. They are simply reversed in order. Given the otherwise unusual nature of these two names, it seems probable that the persons bearing them were brothers—perhaps even twins. Such a relationship would explain why these two names were the direct reverse of each other.

From this consideration of these two names on the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon we may turn to examine the similar names of two brothers who are mentioned in 2 Sam 6. This narrative tells of David's bringing the ark of the covenant from Baale-Judah up to Jerusalem. The ark had been kept in the house of Abinadab in Baale-Judah; and quite naturally, therefore, two of his sons assisted directly in its transport to Jerusalem. The names of these sons are given in the biblical text as "Uzzah" and "Ahio."

Linguistically, there are some difficulties with regard to both of these names. The final element in the name of Uzzah is written first with an $^{\zeta} aleph$ and later with a *he*. The name of Ahio is also problematical: It has been suggested (see 2 Sam 6:3, RSV, margin) that the final element in this name, the *waw*, might represent a pronominal suffix, third person masculine singular—which would provide for this word the translation "his brother" rather than a personal name. This suggestion is not really valid, however, in view of the fact that the word for "brother" in the first part of this name already carries a pronominal suffix, the *yod*, which represents the first person singular. Since this part of this word already translates as "my brother," an additional pronominal suffix attached to

the name would be redundant. Thus in the body of its text the RSV, for example, correctly translates ?hyw as a personal name.

If the first portion of this word is part of a personal name, that part would mean, "My brother (is) . . ." A difficulty remains, however, since one would expect the final element in this name to be spelled out with two or more letters. But that is not the case; instead, it is followed simply by a *waw*. This final *waw* could stand for a consonantal *w*, a vocalic *o*, or a vocalic *u*. The last of these three possibilities is particularly interesting to note, inasmuch as *u* is the vowel which occurs with the word *uz* found in the names of the two brothers on the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon.

The name of Uzzah also seems foreshortened in the biblical text, for it is written to end with only an ?aleph or a *he* as the final element in the name, when one might expect an additional letter or two to accompany that letter. As they stand, the *aleph* or *he* could represent a consonant or an *a*-vowel. These were also the consonant and vowel with which the word ?āh or "brother" was written in the names in two of the lines on the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon. No doubling of the *zayin*, incidentally, need be expected in the type of writing on the ostrakon.

Comparison of the Biblical and Extra-biblical Data

In order to provide a more direct comparison of the names "Uzzah" and "Ahio" in the OT source and on the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon, we may line up the biblical and extra-biblical names for these two persons as follows:

2 Sam 6:3-8		Beth Shemesh Ostrakon
?uz-?a	=	?uz-?aḥi
?aḥi-?ū	=	?aḥi-?uz

The initial elements in both sets of names are the same, but these similar names appear to have been foreshortened in their final element in the biblical text. One way in which this relationship could be viewed is to see these paired extra-biblical names as supplying the final element that appears to be missing from their related biblical names. If that procedure is followed, then one could see their relationship as follows:

2 Sam 6:3-8		Beth Shemesh Ostrakon
?uz-?a(ḥi)	=	?uz-?aḥi
?aḥi-(?ū(z))	=	?aḥi-?uz

The equation proposed here is not a perfect fit. Nevertheless, there appear to be enough similarities in terms of shared common elements, vocalization, and a filial relationship that it may be proposed that these two texts—2 Sam 6 and the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon—may well be referring to the same two individuals, both of whom were sons of Abinadab.

3. *Palaeographical and Geographical Considerations*

Two final comments should be made about the foregoing suggestion—one being a notation concerning palaeography, and the other consisting of some observations relating to historical geography.

Palaeography and Dating of the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon

If the two persons whose names can be read on the obverse of the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon—namely, $\zeta uz-\text{ʔ}ahi$ and $\text{ʔ}ahi-\zeta uz$ —are indeed, as suggested above, two sons of Abinadab who assisted David in moving the ark, then, according to standard chronologies, they should have lived late in the eleventh century B.C. But palaeographers have estimated that the date of the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon is considerably earlier. Puech, for example, dates this text to the late thirteenth century B.C. or ca. 1200. Such a date would fall a century or two before the time proposed above for the potential connection of this text with the individuals in the biblical narrative of 2 Sam 6:3-8.

It is open to question, however, as to whether the general typology of the alphabet's development can be applied so rigidly in this case. The broad splashes of ink used to write the letters of this text indicate that this was not the work of a skilled scribe. Several of the letters are very irregular by any standard. All three of the $\zeta ayins$ are quite different, the first being a small circle with a dot, the second a large irregular circle with a dot, and the third a medium-sized circle without a dot. The dotted $\zeta ayin$ is supposed to be early and the undotted $\zeta ayin$ is supposed to be late, but here they are together in the same text. The *beth* is upside down, and the *shin* is vertical instead of horizontal. Thus it is obvious that the person who wrote this text was not a practiced scribe. Rather, he appears to have been a rural merchant who simply wanted to keep his accounts in the best way he could. This text was apparently the

best that he could do, and certainly was not written in the finest, most up-to-date script. Consequently, palaeographical considerations do not appear to provide the date for this text, except within the most broad and general ranges.

The Data and Implications Pertaining to Historical Geography

With respect to historical geography, the fairly direct connection between the town where the two brothers lived according to the biblical text and the place where the Beth Shemesh Ostracón was found should be noted. The sherd comes from Ains Shems, the site which, as we have noticed at the outset of this essay, has been identified as Beth Shemesh. According to the biblical text, the two brothers came from Baale-Judah. The ark of the covenant is that which makes a connection between these two sites.

When the Philistines returned the ark of the covenant, it came first to Beth Shemesh (1 Sam 6:12-18). Experiencing an adverse effect from the presence of the ark, however, the people of Beth Shemesh desired to send the ark along to Kiriath-jearim (1 Sam 6:19-7:1a). This was done, and the ark was taken to the house of Abinadab in Kiriath-jearim, where it lodged for twenty years (1 Sam 7:1b-2). This Abinadab was the same person from whose house the ark was subsequently taken when it was transported up to Jerusalem, and it was his two sons who assisted in that project (2 Sam 6:3-6). The difference in the name for the location where the ark lodged may presumably be attributed to the difference between the name of the town—Kiriath-jearim—and the name for the general location of the town—Baale-Judah, “the heights of Judah.”

The geographical points followed in the course of transporting the ark indicate that in following the road up through the foothills from Beth Shemesh, one came to Kiriath-jearim/Baale-Judah. This road could, of course, be traversed in the opposite direction, with travel down from Kiriath-jearim to Beth-Shemesh—the direction that ^cUzzah/^cUzz^aħi and ^aħiu/^aħi^cuz appear to have taken, if my proposal concerning the connection between 2 Sam 6 and the Beth Shemesh Ostracón is correct. In the episode reflected by the Beth Shemesh Ostracón, they appear to have traveled from their home down to Beth Shemesh for the purpose of purchasing some wine.

Furthermore, the transaction recorded on the Beth Shemesh Ostrakon, presupposing travel of Uzzah and Ahio from Kiriath-jearim down to Beth Shemesh to purchase some wine, would have occurred earlier than the trip of the two brothers in the opposite direction with the ark of the covenant. This is obvious in view of the fact that during the latter trip Uzzah lost his life (2 Sam 6:6-7).