

THE ʿIZBET ŞARṬAH OSTRACON

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More than a decade has passed since the five line ostrakon from ʿIzbet Şarṭah was recovered from an Early Iron Age grain silo at the site.¹ The fifth line of this text was soon identified as an alphabet.² The preceding four lines have remained undeciphered, however, and they are generally considered to be a random distribution of letters from scribal practice of the alphabet.³

Only one scholar has been able to make some sense out of any of the letter combinations. A. Dotan, from his partial translation of the text, interpreted it as recording the gift of some garments from one person to another.⁴ The conclusions reached about the nature of this text here differ considerably from those of Dotan, but his ground-breaking study provided an important advance in understanding that served as a point of departure for this present study.

Dotan's specific contributions include the identification of three occurrences of the verb *ʿāṭāh*, "to come," in the first, second, and fourth lines; the identification of the word or name for Baal in the second line; and the suggestion to interpret the first word in the

¹For the original publication of the text, see Moshe Kochavi, "An Ostrakon of the Period of the Judges from ʿIzbet Şarṭah," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977): 1-13.

²Aaron Demsky, "A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and Its Implications for the History of the Alphabet," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977): 14-27.

³Javier Teixidor, "Bulletin d'épigraphie sémitique: 1978-1979," *Syria* 56 (1979): 353-354; Joseph Naveh, "The Greek Alphabet: New Evidence," *BA* 43 (1980): 25; Frank Moore Cross, "Newly Found Inscriptions in Old Canaanite and Early Phoenician Scripts," *BASOR* 238 (1980): 9; Émile Puech, "Origine de l'alphabet: Documents en alphabet linéaire et cunéiforme du II^e millénaire," *RB* 93 (1986): 170-172. This is still the position that Demsky holds after reviewing a decade of studies on this text in his "The ʿIzbet Şarṭah Ostrakon Ten Years Later," in *Izbet Şarṭah: An Early Iron Age Site near Rosh Haʿayin, Israel*, ed. Israel Finkelstein, BAR International Series, vol. 299 (Oxford, Eng., 1986), p. 192.

⁴A. Dotan, "New Light on the ʿIzbet Şarṭah Ostrakon," *Tel Aviv* 8 (1981): 160-172.

second line as the Hebrew word for "garment," *k^etonet*. While this last suggestion does not appear to be precisely correct, it still has pointed the way to a more specific identification of that word, a word which has turned out to be very important for understanding the nature of the contents of this text.

1. *General Content of the Text*

My further study of this text has led to the development of alternate readings for some of the letters previously identified and to the identification of letters in the inscription not previously noted in other studies. Grouping these letters together according to their most logical word divisions has yielded the translation and interpretation of this text presented below.

Line-by-line Context

The first line of the text tells of the advance of a group of people from Shiloh to a field at Aphek. Since they came from what is known biblically to have been an Israelite site, it is reasonable to identify this group as Israelites. This identification is confirmed by the fact that the text was found at a site which is Israelite in terms of location and archaeology, as well as by the contents of the fourth line of the text.

The second line identifies a second party as Kittim, or Sea Peoples, which historically included Philistines. Because of the close correspondence of these two groups and their actions to the events described in 1 Sam 4, this text thus far already provides presumptive evidence that it refers to the same events as those described in that biblical passage. According to the rest of the second line, these Kittim took away some unnamed object, presumably the Ark of the Covenant according to biblical parallels, and took it to a series of sites. Three of those sites are named in this line, and two of them are also recognizable in the narrative of 1 Sam 5.

The short third line provides the name of another place, this being the site to which the Ark was returned when it came back to Israelite territory according to 1 Sam 6. The fourth line appears to refer back to events contemporary with those narrated in the first line.

Taken together, these contents of this text correlate quite directly with those described in 1 Sam 4-6. This connection leads to

the conclusion that this ostracon provides a contemporary witness to the events described in that biblical passage.

Preliminary Considerations in Reading the Inscription

Preliminary evidence indicates that this text was intended to be read. Some of the letters from the line of the alphabet were used several times in the lines above it, while others were not used at all. Still other letters were used several times in the same order. Lexical reasons provide the best explanation for this selectivity. In terms of layout, the long second and fourth lines extend across the sherd and down its right margin. The shorter first and third lines extend only part way across the sherd from the left margin. This format indicates that these lines were written from left to right, just as the alphabet was. Since the lines of ancient inscriptions customarily read from top to bottom, these lines should be read in that same direction.

Several letters in this text can easily be confused. *Beth*, *lamed*, and ʿ*ayin* are all circular letters with different kinds of dots and lines in their circles. *Qoph* and *reš* both have circular heads and vertical tails. *Mem* was thought to be missing from the alphabet, but a new identification for it is proposed below. This identification for the *mem* has led to a new identification for the *nun*. Distinctions between similar-looking letters have to be made on the basis of form and function, i.e., the shape of the letter and the sense which it brings to its word and context. No conjunctions or articles appear in this text as translated here, which is in accordance with its early date.

Several photographs and line drawings of the inscription have been published.⁵ The best and most useful photographs of the inscription are the earliest one, published with M. Kochavi's preliminary report on ʿIzbet Šarṭah,⁶ and the most recent one, published by Aaron Demsky in I. Finkelstein's final report on the excavations at that site.⁷ Since the sherd was lighted from different angles when these photographs were taken, some letters stand out

⁵Photographs of the inscription appear with Kochavi's article mentioned in n. 1. above, and with the articles of Naveh, Cross, and Demsky cited in n. 3. An additional photograph of the inscription, taken by M. Weinberg, appears in Robert W. Suder, *Hebrew Inscriptions: A Classified Bibliography* (London, 1984), p. 104.

⁶See the Plate 1 in the Kochavi study of n. 1.

⁷See the plate that accompanies Demsky's work cited in n. 3.

better than others in each of the pictures. I have compared the published photographs and line drawings of the ostrakon with the sherd itself as it is displayed in its cabinet in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. (See **Figure 1** for my own line drawing.)

2. *The Text and Translation*

Transcription

Slash marks represent the break between the two halves of the ostrakon. Circles above letters indicate that they have been damaged.

- 1) ʔ, L, Š, D, Y, ʔ, T, Y, N, / ʔ, P, Q, M, Š, L
- 2) K, T, T, M, L, Q, H, ʔ, T, L, ʔ, Z, R, / D, G, N, B, ʕ, L, ʔ, Š, D, D, G, T
- 3) Y, ʕ, R, M, Q, R, Y, H
- 4) R, ʕ, R, G, L, M, H, P, N, ʔ, T, L, H, G, / D, Z, Q, N, M, S, W, S, B, ʔ, ʕ, L, ʔ, H, L, Q, B, R, N
- 5) ʔ, B, G, D, H, N+W, H, Z, T, Y, K, L, M, / S, P, ʕ, Š, Q, R, Š-Š, T

Word Divisions

ʔ*Aleph* and ʕ*ayin* have been vocalized here to point toward the words in which they function.

- 1) ʔl šdy ʔtyn / ʔpq mšl
- 2) kttm lqh ʔt lʔzr / dgn bʕl ʔšdd gt
- 3) yʕrm qryh
- 4) rʕ rglm hpn ʔt lhg/d zqnm sws bʔ ʕl ʔh lqbrn
- 5) The alphabet

Translation

- 1) Unto the field we came /, (unto) Aphek from Shiloh.
- 2) The Kittim took (it and) came to Azor, / (to) Dagon lord of Ashdod, (and to) Gath.
- 3) (It returned to) Kiriath-Jearim.
- 4) The companion of the footsoldiers, Hophni, came to tel/ the elders, "a horse has come (and) upon (it was my) brother for us to bury."

3. *Commentary*

The Alphabet

Any attempt to translate this text requires that comparisons be made between the alphabet of the fifth line and the letters in the

four preceding lines. Thus, analysis of this inscription should start with the alphabet as a key to its decipherment. Most of the letters in the alphabet are clear. *ʿayin* and *pe* are reversed in comparison to their later alphabetic positions, but examples of this kind of reversal can be found in other Hebrew texts. No parallels for the reversal of *het* and *zayin* are known, however, so this feature of the alphabet should be attributed to the individual scribe who incised this text.

More serious is the matter of the *waw*. F. M. Cross has pointed out that the scribe substituted another letter in its place, and he suggested a *mem* for the letter substituted.⁸ The photographs demonstrate, however, that the vertical stroke of this letter angles sharply to the left at the mid-point of its upper half. This is consistent with the form of a *nun* in other early alphabets, and this letter functions well as a *nun* in the lines above.

Since a *nun* has taken the place of the *waw*, one might assume that no *waw* was present in this alphabet, but that is not the case. The half of the alphabet to the left of the break was written above an incised horizontal line. The only letter which extends below this line extends down from the same position as the *nun*. It has a small circular head right at the line and a vertical tail that extends down from it. This is consistent with the form of the open-headed *waw* of other early alphabets, and this letter functions well as a *waw* in the lines above.

When the scribe came to the *mem* he recognized that he mistakenly had written the *nun* in the place of the *waw*. So he went back and wrote the *waw* in the same position, but below the line. When he came back to where he left off, he could only write a *mem* because he had already used the *nun*. Thus the last letter before the break is a *mem*, not the *nun* with which it has previously been identified. From that point on he continued to the end of the alphabet in the customary order, with the exception of the reversal of the *ʿayin* and *pe*.

Line 1: ʿl šdy ʿtyn / ʿpq mšl

“Unto the field we came, / (unto) Apek from Shiloh.”

Copyists agree upon the first four letters in this line. The *ʿaleph* is clear. A circular letter which could be either a *beth* or a

⁸Cross, pp. 9, 10.

lamed follows. A *beth* here would produce the word ʕab, “father,” but this is hard to relate to the rest of this line. With a *lamed*, ʕel could be taken either as the word for God or the preposition “to.” Since the verb which follows in this line is in the first person plural and since the rest of this line and the text focus upon human activity, the preposition is more likely here than the word for God.

The third letter in this line has been identified previously as a *šin/šim*. Although the fourth letter is somewhat irregular, it still is comparable to the triangular *dalet* of the alphabetic line, and it has been identified as a *dalet* since this text was first published.⁹ The letter following the *dalet* has been copied previously as either a *taw* or *het*. It does have a vertical leg on the left, but it does not have a vertical leg on the right, so it cannot be a *het*. It does not have any crossbars, so it cannot be a *taw*. To identify this letter it should be noted that it extends out further, to the edge of the sherd, and just before it reaches that margin it gives off a short stroke which curves upward to the left. This forked head on a vertical stem identifies this letter as a *yod*.

This second word in line 1, should be read either as *šdy* or *šdy*. *šdy* could represent the patriarchal epithet for God as *šadday*, but the same reasons against translating the initial ʕel as El or God are against this proposal too. Thus, this word should be read as *šdy* with a *šin*. *šadeh* is the Hebrew word for “field” and that is the way this word should be translated here. While the final *e*-vowel of this noun was more commonly written with *he*, there is at least one early instance in which it was written with a *yod* (Deut 32:13). The *yod* present here may serve that same function.

The ʕaleph and *taw* which come next are reasonably clear and have been identified as such by previous copyists. Dotan correctly identified this combination as representing the verb ʕātāh, “to come.”¹⁰ This verb occurs twice more in this text, written directly below this form, in the second and fourth lines. The upper half of the letter which follows the *taw* was incised with a vertical stroke which angles upward to the right and forks as it approaches the edge of the sherd. Thus it is to be identified as a *yod*. Another letter extends down to the left from the lower end of the *yod*. This is the

⁹Kochavi, p. 5.

¹⁰Dotan, pp. 162-163, 167.

notched form of a *nun* which is lying on its side. This *nun* matches well with the horizontally-oriented *nun* that occurs as the last letter in the fourth line. The lower pole of the *yod* and the upper pole of the *nun* were written so closely together that they appear to be ligatured. Given that close connection of the *yod* as the superior letter and the *nun* as the inferior letter, the *yod* should probably be read first.

The whole of this verb reads as ²*tyn*. The ²*aleph* and *taw* represent the verbal root. The *yod* is interpreted here as reflecting the final radical of this doubly weak Lamed He verb. The *nun* should be taken as the sufformative of the first person plural in the perfect tense. This first person plural verb should therefore be translated, "we came."

The three words to the left of the break in the sherd thus comprise a complete phrase or sentence consisting of a prepositional phrase followed by a verb: "Unto the field we came." Geographical information from the second half of the first line indicates that the first-person subject of this verb should be understood as Israelites. They stand in contrast and opposition to the opposing group identified by name at the beginning of the second line.

There is sufficient space between the *yod* and *nun* and the break in the sherd for another letter to have been written here. Some traces appear in this space, but they do not make up an identifiable letter. If another letter had been written here it probably would have been either a *lamed* or a *mem* used prepositionally. Since neither of these letters, or any other letter, can be detected in this space, it has been left blank. Nevertheless, the idea of a preposition should still be understood as functioning here, even though it was not written out.

The phrase which follows appears to contain two toponyms, the second of which is preceded by a prepositional *mem*. The first should thus be understood as preceded by a prepositional *lamed*, even though it was not written out; it can be understood as being taken over from the preposition ²*el* written at the beginning of line. Occurrences of prepositions being understood later in a line after being written out earlier appear also in the second line; here three toponyms occur, but the first is the only one preceded by a written prepositional *lamed*.

Two letters have been recognized previously following the break in this line, a clear example of an ²*aleph* followed by a

circular letter.¹¹ This circular letter has generally been identified as an ʿayin, but it contains no dot like the other ʿayins of this text. It also has a tail which angles down toward the left and then bends toward the horizontal to reach the break in the sherd. There is a dot in this letter at the point where the tail takes off from the circle. The round head of this letter makes it either a *qoph* or a *reš*. Given the size of that head and its fit with its context, this letter should be identified as a *qoph*. But ʔaleph and *qoph* alone do not make up a good Hebrew word, so another letter must be present here. That other letter is located just above the right side of the ʔaleph. There a short horizontal line runs over to the left upper quadrant of the circular head of the *qoph*, and at that point it angles sharply downward. This letter resembles the *pe* in the alphabetic line, but it has been rotated 90° to the right. This *pe* shows up best in the photograph published with Demsky's report.

Located as it is, overlapping the ʔaleph and the *qoph*, this *pe* should be read between them. Thus this word is ʔpq, which can be equated directly with the place name of Aphek, the location where the Philistines encamped and where they fought the Israelite troops according to 1 Sam 4:1. With the idea of the preposition from the beginning of this line being understood here, this toponym indicates that it was "unto" Aphek that "we [the Israelites] came." The idea of the field from the beginning of this line should also be understood here, the two parts of the first line being parallel. In one case it was unto the field that the Israelites came, and in the other case it was unto Aphek. Thus, this field should have been located at Aphek, and that is what 1 Sam 4:1-2 indicates to be the case: Verse 1 states that the Philistines encamped at Aphek, and verse 2 says that the Israelites fought them on a field (*šadeh*) there.

A short distance to the right of the *qoph* in Aphek appear the traces of a letter which consisted of a large outer loop and a smaller, more-angular inner loop. The lines of these two loops extend down to the left, where they meet. This letter comes closest in form to the *mem* in the alphabetic line, and it also resembles the *mem* in *zqnm* in the fourth line. This letter is more readily visible

¹¹An ʔaleph followed by a circle is the way in which these letters have been copied as early as Kochavi's original report on the text (1977) and as recently as Puech's study (1986). See the line drawings found in Kochavi, p. 5 and Puech, p. 171.

in the Kochavi photograph than it is in the Demsky photograph. This letter functions best here as the preposition “from,” prefixed to the following word.

A large gull-wing-shaped sign follows next, beginning just to the right and below the end of the lower stroke of the *mem*. It is quite clear in the Demsky photograph, but hardly shows up in the Kochavi photo. The central V of this sign is especially deeply incised in a shallow groove in the sherd. Its form makes it a *šin*, horizontally oriented. A circular letter is visible in the Demsky photograph located directly below the right wing of the *šin*. Its circular stroke ends by turning in to the center of the circle and there it ends in a dot. This is either a *beth* or a *lamed*. Its form resembles the *lamed* more, and a *lamed* makes better sense here. Located below the *šin*, this *lamed* protrudes halfway down into the line below. This intrusion explains why the words to its right and left on the next line are so widely separated.

The word identified here is *šl*. Since it occurs in a prepositional phrase that begins with “from,” the people represented by the action of the verb in this line came “from” *šl*. Such a context calls for a place name. As a place name, *šl* correlates well with the name of Shiloh. This was the place from which the Israelites brought the Ark to the battle at Aphek according to 1 Sam 4:4. The final vowel in the name of Shiloh was written twenty-one times in the OT with *he* and 10 times with *waw*. Here that final *o*-vowel is not represented in writing, and its absence is compatible with the early date of this writing system.

All of the words of this line have now been analyzed and translated. With the preposition from the beginning of the line understood as recurring at the beginning of its second phrase, this line as a whole can be translated, “Unto the field we came, (unto) Aphek from Shiloh.” This indicates that on the occasion referred to a group of Israelites travelled from Shiloh, where the Ark was tabernacled in the hill country, to a (battle-) field located near to Aphek in the coastal plain. The same sort of movement is recorded in 1 Sam 4:3-5.

Line 2: *kttm lqh ʔt Pʔr / dgn bʔl ʔšdd gt*

“The Kittim took (it and) came to Azor/, (to) Dagon lord of Ashdod, (and to) Gath.”

Previous copyists have read the first three letters of this line as *ktn*. Dotan identified this as the Hebrew word for “garment,”

ktn(t).¹² The *kaph* and *taw* are clear, but what was formerly taken as a *nun* should now be taken as a *mem*, according to the discussion of the alphabet above. A second *taw* is also present here, located just below and to the right of the first *taw*. It shows up clearly in most photographs. The crossbars of these two *taws* were incised more deeply than their vertical strokes. The word present here is, therefore, *kttm* or *Kittim*.¹³ This noun is the subject of the verbs which follow.

Originally this word was used for people who came from Cyprus, but it came to be used as a general designation for any westerners who came to Syro-Palestine by sea. Here it fits well as a general designation for the group of Sea Peoples to which the Philistines belonged. Other Sea Peoples like the Tjekker from Dor may have accompanied the Philistines on this foray into Israelite territory.

The letter which follows the *mem* is circular, and it contains a stroke which angles down toward the left. This could be either *beth* or *lamed*, but *lamed* brings better sense to the text. The next letter has a large circular head open to the left and a tail that angles down to the left. This is either a *qoph* or *reš*, with *qoph* fitting better in the context. Kochavi took this letter as a *qoph* in his initial publication.¹⁴ The lower right corner of the next letter is damaged, but its square-boxed nature still is evident. It has been identified as *het* since Kochavi's original publication.¹⁵

This word reads *lqh*, the verb "to take." The object that was taken should be understood as implied with the toponym at the end of the previous line. The purpose for mentioning the toponym

¹²Dotan, p. 165.

¹³In a referee's note from a journal, one of my critics has held that the reduplicated *taw* in this word is an embarrassment for my identification of this word as *Kittim*. Because geminated consonants were not supposed to have been written out twice in this script, it would have been better for me if I had not found the second *taw*! There are two main problems with this view. First, the *taw* written out twice is simply an epigraphic fact of this text, and the only question about these letters is what word they belong to. They still fit best with *Kittim*. Second, even though these *taws* were used in a way different from the practice of scribes who wrote other inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible later, this script was still in a developmental stage at this time. It is unwise to restrict the freedom of a scribe producing an inscription like this to experiment with his own way in which to represent gemination.

¹⁴Kochavi, p. 5.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

of Shiloh was to indicate that the Ark came with the Israelite troops from that place (cf. 1 Sam 4:4). The Kittim then "took" it: In other words, they captured the Ark and took it away. An object pronoun should be thought of as suffixed to the verb with an unwritten *o*-vowel. The same verb is used six times between 1 Sam 4:11 and 5:2 to describe what the Philistines did with the Ark.

Another clear occurrence of the verb ʔt follows, as Dotan noted.¹⁶ The subject of this verb should also be taken as the Kittim mentioned at the beginning of this line. The *u*-vowel of the third person plural was not written out here. A circular letter with a horizontal stroke follows the *taw* of ʔt . The form of this letter identifies it as a *lamed*. Used prepositionally it indicates that the Kittim went, with the Ark, "to" some place. A place name should follow this preposition, and that is indeed the case. The site named after this preposition identifies it as the first of three locations to which, according to this text, the Philistines took the Ark.

1) ʔr = Azor

The ʔaleph with which the first place-name begins is clear. This is followed by two opposing triangles which make up an hourglass-shaped sign comparable to the *zayin* in the alphabet. The letter to the right of the *zayin* has a triangular or rounded head and a tail that extends down to the left. This could be either a *qoph* or a *reš*, with a *reš* making better sense here. These letters make up the name of Azor, a place not mentioned in the Bible. It is mentioned, however, by Sennacherib as one of the coastal plain sites which he conquered during his campaign of 701 (Beth-Dagon, Joppa, Banai-Barqa, and Azuru).¹⁷ It has been identified with Yazûr, near Joppa. This ostrakon now takes our knowledge of Azor in textual sources back four centuries before the time of Sennacherib.

The literary reference to Azor here fits well with what is known of the site archaeologically. Although Yazûr itself has not been excavated, it has been the subject of surveys and clandestine digging, and some of the tombs west of the tell have been excavated. "Remarkably fine Philistine assemblages" were found there and they include "a complete range of Philistine pottery, from the earliest types to the later debased, assimilated vessels." On the basis

¹⁶Dotan, pp. 162-163, 167.

¹⁷ANET, p. 287.

of "the very elaborate decoration of many of the pieces [which are] unique to Azor," it is thought that the site probably had "a local pottery workshop blessed with talented potters."¹⁸

The archaeological evidence from Azor demonstrates the thoroughly Philistine character of this site in the twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C., the period during which the battle of 1 Sam 4 was fought at Aphek. It would thus have made a useful location from which the Philistines could have launched their operations for a battle at Aphek. It would also have provided them with a useful way station as they returned to their homeland from Aphek. As the first major stopping point after the battle, some of the dead Philistine soldiers may have been buried there.¹⁹ Thus, this text's mention of Azor is quite compatible with the nature of the contemporary settlement according to the archaeological evidence.

2) *dgn bʿl ʿšdd*

"(to) Dagon lord of Ashdod,"

The first letter to the right of the break is a rounded but still triangular *dalet* pointing downward. It is located above the *dalet* in the next line, and it can be compared with the two *dalets* which point inward from the sherd's edge at the end of this line. Two horizontal lines extend to the right from this *dalet*, a longer one above and a shorter one below. The superior line curves up gradually to the right, and the inferior line angles back sharply at its left end. These lines have been noted and copied by previous

¹⁸Trude Dothan, *The Philistines and Their Material Culture* (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 54-55.

¹⁹T. Dothan has summarized the evidence from the tombs found here by noting, "The rich Iron Age cemetery located on a *kurkar* hill (area D) next to Tel Azor and east of the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway, was excavated by M. Dothan during two seasons (1958, 1960). Forty-five tombs, dating from the twelfth down to the ninth century B.C. were excavated" (*ibid.*). The most common type of Iron I burial at Azor was in a simple pit with the body on the back oriented on an east-west axis. Most of these burials can be dated to the twelfth or eleventh century according to the typical Philistine pottery found with them. One jar burial was identified here. Brick tombs were also employed, built below the ground in the form of a coffin. The small amount of Philistine pottery found with them dates their use to the eleventh century. A cremation consisting of charred bones in a large storage jar was also found here, and it has been dated to the second half of the eleventh century. This makes it the earliest example of cremation known from Palestine west of the Jordan River. Dothan takes the sudden appearance of cremation here as evidence for the arrival of a new ethnic element in the area (p. 57).

students of this text, but they did not observe that these two lines are connected by a curved loop on the right. Thus, this sign looks like a fishhook lying on its side, with its short barb pointing upward. Rotating this sign to the vertical position identifies it with the *gimmel* in the alphabet.

Another horizontal letter appears immediately below the *gimmel*, and it curves down to the right. It appears like the outline of a bowl on the left, with its handle extending to the right. Although it is not as sharply notched as some of the other *nuns* in this text, it closely matches the *nun* in the verb in the first line and the *nun* at the very end of the fourth line, both of which are also lying on their sides like this *nun*. The *dalet* and *gimmel* of this word can be seen better in Kochavi's original photograph, while the *nun* can be seen better in Demsky's more recent photograph. This word should be read as *dgn*, which can be compared quite directly with the name of the god Dagon.

The word to the right of *dgn* contains the letters of the word or name of Baal—i.e., *b^l* or *ba^cal*—as noted by Dotan.²⁰ It consists of three circular letters in a row. The first and third contain characteristic lines which identify them as *beth* and *lamed*, respectively, while the middle circle is dotted, which makes it an *'ayin*. Thus this word reads clearly as *b^l*. This could be either a reference to a specific god by name or epithet, such as Baal (Hadad), or it could simply be the title "lord." Since the name of the god Dagon precedes this word and the name of the city of Ashdod appears to follow it, it fits best as the title "lord," referring to Dagon as the divine sovereign over Ashdod.

The next word in this line was written up to and along the edge of the sherd. The first, third, and fourth letters of this word are reasonably clear, but its second letter is more faint due to damage. A v-shaped letter clearly identifiable as an *ʔaleph* pointing to the right appears in the space following the *lamed* of *ba^cal* and the *lamed* of Shiloh that intrudes from the line above. Beyond this there are two clear examples of the triangular *dalet* that point inward from the edge of the sherd. They show up better in the Kochavi photograph than they do in the Demsky photograph.

The more faint letter that intervenes between the *ʔaleph* and the first *dalet* was written with a line that starts out curved but ends up angular. It extends from the point of the *ʔaleph* to the point of

²⁰Dotan, p. 165-166.

the *dalet*. This form fits best with the *šin* of the alphabet. It shows up better in the Demsky photograph than it does in the Kochavi photograph. These four letters, ²*š-d-d* make up the name of the city of Ashdod, the place to which the Philistines took the Ark according to 1 Sam 5:1-7.

The three words in this phrase can now be analyzed as Dagon, the name of the god involved, his title as lord, and the place name of Ashdod, the city over which he presided as divine lord. The first two of these words stand in apposition to each other, and the last two stand in a construct relationship. The preposition that is understood with this phrase is taken over as a continuing idea from the *lamed* which precedes the name of Azor.

As the northernmost coastal city in the Philistine pentapolis, this was the first city in the Philistine heartland to which the captured Ark was taken. That Dagon was the lord or chief god of that city is confirmed by his status in 1 Sam 5:1-7. Thus the Ark was taken by the Philistines to the temple of their chief god in this city. Both the OT record and the ostracon indicate that the Ark was taken, not just to the city of Ashdod, but especially to the god of that city; but 1 Sam 5 goes further by describing the nature of the conflict between the two gods Yahweh and Dagon that took place there. The ostracon may imply as much, for it indicates that subsequently the Ark was taken on to another Philistine city.

3) *gt* = Gath

The angular head of another letter appears along the edge of the sherd, to the right of the second *dalet* in Ashdod. It runs down a ridge in the sherd. The trace of a short stroke extends downward to the left from its upper pole, giving it an angular head. This form is identified as a *gimmel*. Below this *gimmel*, on the same ridge in the sherd, the crossed strokes of a *taw* can be seen quite clearly. The name of this place was, therefore, *gt* or Gath. As one of the inland cities of the Philistines, Gath was the next city after Ashdod to which the Ark was taken according to 1 Sam 5:8-9.

Line 3: *yʿm qryh*

“(It returned to) Kiriath-jearim.”

This short line, which extends in from the left margin of the sherd, contains eight letters. The first letter in this line has a head that forks to the right and a vertical tail. It is to be identified as a

yod, as Cross recognized.²¹ A circular letter with a dot in it appears under the right limb of the forked head and is thus an *ayin*. It shows up best in the Demsky photograph. The third letter in this line has a round head and a vertical tail, which could represent either *qoph* or *reš*. A *reš* fits better with what follows.

The tail of the *reš* has a short stroke which crosses it horizontally, giving the letter the appearance of an Egyptian *ankh*-sign. At its right end this horizontal stroke continues by angling upward in an irregular zig-zag fashion, indicating that it is part of a succeeding letter. The downward stroke of this letter begins at an apex above the level of the head of the *reš*. From that point it descends vertically to the right with four more short strokes arranged in a zig-zag pattern. Even though it is irregular in shape, this letter comes closest in form to that of the *mem*. It resembles the *mems* in the first and fourth lines of the text more than it does the *mem* in the alphabetic line. Thus far these four letters compose the word $\gamma^{\epsilon}rm$ which can be vocalized readily as $\gamma^{\epsilon}arim$. This is the Hebrew word for "forests," and it was used on occasion in compound place names, such as Kiriath-jearim.

The second word in this short line begins with two letters with circular heads and vertical tails. They could represent any combination of *qoph* and *reš*. Proportionately they resemble the *qoph* and *reš* in the alphabetic line in that order, and the combination of *qr* brings the best sense to this name. Immediately to the right of the second circular head a forked head appears. It angles somewhat to the right, and its short tail angles down toward the left. Even though its tail is short, this form identifies this letter as a *yod*.

To the right of this *yod* a slightly curved vertical stroke extends down to run beside the left leg of the *heth* in the line below. A short horizontal stroke extends out to the right from the midpoint of this vertical stroke and it runs with the top crossbar of the *heth* below. At the upper end of this vertical stroke, another more faint horizontal stroke extends out to the right. On the right, at the inferior pole of this vertical stroke, it runs into the middle crossbar of the *heth* below. What we have here, then, are two box-shaped letters partially superimposed upon each other. The inferior box of the superior letter is basically superimposed upon the superior box of the inferior letter. It is clear that these two letters are similar in form. The one difference between them is that the lower letter has a

²¹Cross, p. 9.

vertical leg on the right, while the superior letter does not. That makes the letter in the line above a *he* and the letter in the line below a *ḥeth*. This *he* in the third line fills out the word *qryh*, "town." It was also used on occasion in compound place names like Kiriath-jearim to identify the town referred to.

The two words which make up this name are *y^crm qryh* or Jearim-qiryah. These are the elements found in the name of Kiriath-jearim, but written in reverse order. Because of this order, *qiryh* appears in the absolute form ending in *-ah*. Instead of "the town of the forests," we now have here an appositional form which means, "the forests: the town." In spite of this reversal the place referred to is still clearly identifiable.

Why, however, did this scribe write this name this way? He should have had some purpose for doing so. A knowledge of biblical geography and history aids in answering this question. The second line of this text lists three Philistine sites to which the Ark was taken. This third line, on the other hand, names a Judahite site to which the Ark was returned. When the sites listed here are compared with those that appear in 1 Sam 4-6, we can see that this list has skipped over both Ekron, the last Philistine site where the Ark stopped (1 Sam 5:10-6:11), and Beth-Shemesh, the first Judahite site to which the Ark was returned (1 Sam 6:12-20). The ostracon list goes instead directly to Kiriath-jearim, the second Judahite site to which the Ark was brought (1 Sam 6:21). In contrast to the brief and adverse visit of the Ark to Beth-Shemesh, the Ark was housed at Kiriath-jearim for twenty years (1 Sam 7:2). It appears to be that it is this more permanent state of residence which the writer of this inscription wished to emphasize by naming Kiriath-jearim as the point to which the Ark returned.

But if the long stay of the Ark at Kiriath-jearim explains why that site was chosen to refer to the return to the Ark, the reason why the words of this place name were reversed remains unexplained. In order to answer this question a comparison should be made with the contents of the preceding lines of the inscription. Those lines contain long statements which contain subjects, verbs, and prepositional phrases. This third line, on the other hand, contains only a place name. But that place name cannot stand alone grammatically. It too should have a verb, subject, and preposition to accompany it. These, however, were not written out here and should be understood from some previous expressions in the text. They cannot come from the second line, for that line describes

Philistine activities. They should, therefore, be understood as coming from the first line, which is Israelite by content. According to biblical parallels the subject of the third line should be "some Israelites,"; the verb should be "to come, or bring"; the object should be the Ark; and the preposition present should be "to, unto." All of these were previously expressed or implied in the first line, but there the action went in the opposite direction, taking the Ark down from the hill country to the battlefield. Here the action is in the reverse direction, from the coastal plain back up toward the hill country. To represent this turn-about, the writer appears to have utilized the clever literary technique of chiastically reversing the elements in this compound place name. In this way all of the action of the first line can be understood as having been reversed here, without writing it all out; it is indicated by simply reversing the order of the two words in the place name.

A second reason why these names may have been reversed could have to do with a grammatical function in Hebrew known as the *he* locale, or directional *he*. By adding a *he* onto the ends of place names, Hebrew could express the idea of motion toward them. In this case reversing the grammatical relationship between these two words by reversing their order restored the *he* to the absolute form of the second word. In this particular case, that *he* could serve double duty. It functions normally as the feminine ending on the word, but it also provides the particular letter which provided the idea of directional movement. With the elements in this compound place name reversed in a chiastic order and the second ending with a potential *he* locale, this text has expressed the idea of the movement of the Ark of the Covenant back into Israelite territory in a very short, cryptic, but sophisticated way.

Line 4: *r^c rglm hpn ʔt lhg/d zqnm sws b^ʔ ʔ ʔh lqbrm*

"The companion of the footsoldiers, Hophni, came to tel/1 the elders,
'a horse has come (and) upon (it was my) brother for us to bury.'"

The first three lines of this text traced the travels of the Ark from the beginning to the end of the episode that is covered also in 1 Sam 4-6. The fourth line of this text then turns back to consider an important event which took place at the pivotal point when the Israelites lost the Ark to the Philistines. It apparently does so because this event explains how the Ark was lost. The preceding lines have explained what happened, this line provides the explanation as to how it happened.

Previous copyists have begun this fourth line with a circular sign that has a dot in it. This identifies it as an ʿ*ayin*. The photographs demonstrate, however, that there is another, previously unrecognized, letter to the left of this ʿ*ayin*. It has a small circular head and a vertical tail, which identifies it as either a *qoph* or *reš*. A *reš* followed by an ʿ*ayin*, makes up the word *rʿ* or *rēʿ*, “friend, companion, comrade, fellow,” and because of that meaning the *reš* is preferred over a meaningless *qoph*. This word appears to be in a construct relationship with the word which follows it. That word is interpreted below as the plural noun for “footsoldiers.” Thus the individual referred to here should be thought of as a companion of those footsoldiers, but not a soldier himself. The individual involved is identified by the personal name which follows after the word for “soldiers.”

The first letter of the next word has a round head and a tail that extends down from it. This is either a *qoph* or a *reš*, with a *reš* fitting better here. The next letter has an angular head with a downstroke on the left and thus is a *gimmel*. The third letter is circular, with its lower limb folding underneath from the right. It is therefore a *lamed*. Thus far, this word is *rgl* or *regel*, “foot,” or, with an unwritten *i*-vowel, *raglî*, “footsoldier,” which fits this context better. The looped form of the *mem* that comes next is clear, and it functions as a masculine plural ending on this noun.

The letter following consists of the closed boxes of the *het*. A short letter with a sharp angular head occurs to the right of this *het*, and this form should be identified as a *pe*. An irregularity in the head of this *pe* has been noted in the line drawing of it by Cross.²² This is not an irregularity, but rather it is part of the letter written above it. The angular jog of a *nun* has been fitted over the head of the *pe* like a cap. One limb extends from this point to the left to touch the right leg of the *het* while the other limb extends out to the right to parallel the upper horizontal stroke of the ʿ*aleph* below.²³ Thus the stance of this *nun* is horizontal, like the *nun* with the verb in the first line.

These three letters make up the word *hpn*. This fits best as the personal name of Hophni, one of the two priestly sons of Eli (1 Sam 4:4). The final *i*-vowel in his name was not written here. Along with his brother Phinehas, Hophni brought the Ark from

²²Ibid., p. 8.

²³The left-hand limb of the *nun* shows up better in the Demsky photograph, while the right-hand limb shows up better in the Kochavi photograph.

Shiloh to Ebenezer, and both brothers eventually died in the battle fought there. At the point in time referred to by this statement, however, Hophni was still alive.

The ²*aleph* and *taw* which follow this name are clear, and they have been identified previously by Dotan as the verb ²*āṭāh*, “to come.” This is the third occurrence of this verb in the text. In context this verb may be taken as a third person masculine singular, with Hophni as its subject.

The next letter is circular and contains a stroke that angles down toward the left inside the circle. That identifies it as a *lamed*. It is taken here as a preposition prefixed to an infinitive. Previously the letters on both sides of the break in this line have been read as *he* and *dalet*. These readings appear to be correct, but they require an additional letter to make up a word. Another vertical stroke appears to the right of the crossbars of the *he*, near to and parallel to the break in the sherd. This almost makes the preceding letter look like a *heth* instead of a *he*, but the faint and damaged traces of a head which curves over to the right from this vertical stroke appear in the Demsky photograph. This resembles the *gimmel* in the alphabetic line. This word should read, therefore, as *hgd*, the Hiphil infinitive *hg(y)d* from *ngd*, “to tell, report” (cf. 1 Sam 4:13).

The sign to the right of the *dalet* consists of two vertical strokes that bend toward each other in the middle. Cross has identified this letter as a *zayin*.²⁴ The circular head of the next letter fits into the concavity of the right-hand stroke of the *zayin*. Its tail angles downward to the left. This is either a *qoph* or a *reš*, and *q* makes more sense here than does *zr*. A stroke with an angular bend extends upward to the right beyond the circular head of the *qoph*. This is the shape of another *nun*. Together these three letters make up the word *zqn*, “elder.”

Below the *nun* of *zqn* a letter appears that is composed of two strokes. The first stroke slopes downward toward the left. The second extends downward at an angle, bends to the vertical, and bends again to the horizontal on the left to join the other stroke as it comes down from above. While this letter is irregular in form, it comes closest to the *mem* in the alphabet. Here it functions as a plural ending to the noun for the “elders.” According to 1 Sam 4:3 the elders were the ones who requested that the Ark be brought from Shiloh to Ebenezer. It is unlikely that elders accompanied the

²⁴Cross, pp. 10, 11.

Israelite troops into battle. Rather, while waiting in the camp at Ebenezer, they received the news that Hophni brought from the battlefield.

Three short damaged horizontal strokes appear to the right of the *mem*. From them a tail curves downward to the left. Although it is badly written in the alphabetic line, this form is characteristic of the *samek* in other early alphabets. The letter to the right of the *samek* has an open circular head and a tail that angles downward to the left. It appears to have been written with double lines, and it corresponds in form to the *waw* of the alphabet. To the right of this *waw* is another letter with three crossbars intersected by a vertical stroke. This is another example of the *samek*. The word here, therefore, is *sws* or "horse." Since horses were not incorporated into the fighting forces of Israel at this time (2 Sam 8:4), it may be expected that this horse came from Philistine quarters in the battle.

To the right of the second *samek* is a small damaged circular letter. Its inner stroke extends down to the left, which corresponds to the *beth* in the alphabet. To the right of the *beth* is a very clear ²*aleph*. Together these two letters make up a form of the verb *b(w)ʿ*, "to come." The subject of this verb is the horse just mentioned. The dotted circle of an ʿ*ayin* comes next, and this is followed by a circular letter that is open at the bottom from right to left like a *lamed*. These two letters make up the preposition ʿ*l*, "on, upon." The reference is to the object located upon the horse that had come to Israelite lines.

The next word of the inscription identifies the object which the horse carried. A rather clear example of an ²*aleph* is followed by traces of the boxes of the *het* which previous copyists have noted. This reading provides the word ²*h* or "brother." This may be taken as a reference to Hophni's brother Phinehas without using the personal name. Since Hophni gave his report in the first person, the pronominal suffix "my" (*i*) should be understood as suffixed to this noun even though it was not written out here.

The picture that develops from this description is one of the body of Phinehas slung across the back of a horse which the Philistines sent to the Israelites, undoubtedly to demoralize them. Hophni reported this adverse turn of events to the elders back at base camp. Since Phinehas was dead and Hophni apparently returned without the Ark, the Ark probably had been lost by this time in the battle. Neither of the two priestly brothers were in

possession of it, and that is the main point of this statement. Hophni returned to camp more to report the loss of the Ark than the death of his brother, but the description of one event is obliquely couched in the description of the other. Though Hophni was still alive at this time, he was soon to return to the battle and fall there too (1 Sam 4:11).

The final word of the fourth line begins with a clearcut case of a *lamed*. It is interpreted here as being prefixed to a noun or to an infinitive. A circular-headed long-tailed letter follows as the first letter of that word. It can be taken as either a *qoph* or a *reš*, and a *qoph* fits better with what follows. Next comes a circular letter with a short stroke extending into its left lower quadrant. Its form is that of a *beth*. The last letter of this word has an almost triangular head. Its tail curves around under the head instead of extending straight out. In spite of these irregularities, this letter should be taken as either a *qoph* or *reš*, and a *reš* makes better sense here.

These letters form the root *qbr*, which can either be a noun (“grave”) or a verb (“to bury”). The word appears to be suffixed by the bent-axis letter which was incised along the lower margin of the sherd from its corner. This is a *nun*, not the *šin* as it has been previously identified. The *nun* represents the first person plural possessive pronominal suffix, “our.” As a noun it would refer to the fact that Phinehas’ body was returned “for our (family) grave.” As an infinitive the verb would indicate that his body was returned “for our burying.” While the nominal interpretation is more likely, I have translated this phrase as a verb because it reads more smoothly in English. Either interpretation is acceptable and the net result is essentially the same.

5. Summary

Language

Analyzed here this text contains 81 letters in its first four lines, followed by the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in the fifth line,²⁵

²⁵One of the more recent studies dealing with this inscription has not been available to me: namely, the part that it plays in B. Sass, “The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its development in the Second Millennium B.C.” (Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 1985). According to Demsky’s brief statement about this work, Sass has agreed in a majority of cases with Kochavi’s reading of the letters in the

a total of 103 letters on the ostracon. This reading provides a text which appears to be essentially complete. According to its lexicography, morphology, and syntax, it was written in good classical Biblical Hebrew. As is expected from its early date, this text does not employ any articles, conjunctions, or vowel letters, with the possible exception of two *yods* in *šdy* and *ʔtyn*.

Seven verbs occur in the text: two infinitives and five perfects. The perfect tense of the narrative accords well with its character as a recital of recent, but past, events. Forms corresponding to all seven of these verbs are found in Biblical Hebrew. All of the nouns of this text are found in Biblical Hebrew. Five of the six place names identified are found in Biblical Hebrew. The one personal name mentioned in the inscription occurs in 1 Sam 4.

Not only are the words of this text found in the OT, eleven of them are found specifically in 1 Sam 4-7. The closeness of these lexical relationships illustrates the close literary and historical ties between the two sources. Each of the words has been discussed above as they appeared in the inscription, and they can now be listed together in a table:

Ostracon	Word/Name		1 Samuel
	Hebrew	English	
Line 1	<i>šdy</i>	field	4:2
	<i>ʔpq</i>	Aphek	4:1
	<i>šl</i>	Shiloh	4:3, 4
Line 2	<i>lqh</i>	took	4:11ff.
	<i>ʔšdd</i>	Ashdod	5:1-8
	<i>gt</i>	Gath	5:8-9
Line 3	<i>yʿrm qryh</i>	Kiriath-jearim	6:21
Line 4	<i>rglm</i>	footsoldiers	4:10
	<i>hpn</i>	Hophni	4:4, 11, 17
	<i>lhgd</i>	to tell	4:13, 14
	<i>zqnm</i>	elders	4:3

inscription and in a minority of cases has concurred with Cross' reading. Demsky lists the readings of seventeen letters taken from Sass' thesis by line and letter number. I concur with most of Sass' identifications, but two of them appear to be incorrect according to their interpretation here. His *he* as the twenty-third letter in the fourth line should be instead as *heth*, possibly a typographical error; and no *zayin* is present as the eighth letter in the first line. Cf. Demsky, "ʿIzbet Šarṭah Ostracon," p. 191.

The order of the vocabulary of the ostrakon follows the vocabulary of the biblical text through the first three lines of the inscription because the two narratives run parallel there. The fourth line of the ostrakon then returns to treat an earlier event in the narrative in more detail. In so doing, its vocabulary reverts to the earlier vocabulary of the biblical passage. Comparing these two vocabularies illustrates the fact that the text of this inscription divides into two main sections. The first three lines constitute the first main section, and the fourth line comprises the second main section.

Literary Structure

The three main statements of this inscription all contain forms of the verb ʔāṭāh , "to come." The action and structure of these statements revolve around the occurrences of this verb and have even been inscribed in line with each other vertically on the sherd. In addition, this verb should be thought of as understood, though not written out, in the short third line. The use of this verb is striking in view of its absence from 1 Sam 4-6.

In Biblical Hebrew the verb ʔāṭāh was used in poetry, but not in prose. This does not necessarily mean that the text before us was written in poetry, but it may suggest that this was a conscious literary product of some quality. It was not just random practice scratchings of a semi-literate school boy. Another feature which may stem from the quality of this effort is the identification of Israel's opponents as Kittim, when the ordinary designation of "Philistines" would have been adequate (cp. Num 24:24).

Each of the three lines in the first main section of the text manifests its own special literary technique. The first line employs parallelism of thought between its two statements, so that the preposition from the first must be understood as taken over in the second. The way in which the place names were used in the second line manifests some creativity. The central phrase "Dagon lord of Ashdod" is flanked or framed by the single-word place names of Azor and Gath, thus emphasizing the place where the divine confrontation took place. The intentional inversion of the two elements in the place name in the third line also represents a sophisticated literary technique. In the fourth line which makes up the second main section of the text, the technique of using a direct

quotation from Hophni is present. Thus each line of this text employs a particular literary technique, demonstrating the high literary quality of the text.

Another way in which the literary artistry of this text is demonstrated is through the indirect and oblique way in which it refers to its central subject, the Ark. The Ark itself is never mentioned by name in the text, but it is always in the background of the events that are described. One can only see this through comparison with the biblical account, but when that source is taken into account this point is evident. The first line of the inscription tells of movement from Shiloh to Aphek, and this was when the Ark was brought there. The second line tells of Philistine movement away from the battlefield to Azor, Ashdod, and Gath. These were sites to which the Philistines took the Ark after they captured it. The third line mentioned the site of Kiriath-jearim, which was the place where the Ark was kept after it was returned by the Philistines. The fourth line tells of the death of Phinehas, an event which probably occurred at the point in the battle when the Ark was lost. Thus the Ark is the unspoken or unwritten, but continuing, focus of this text to such a degree that it could be described as "The Indirect Story of the Ark."

Date

The events referred to in the text of the ostracon parallel those in 1 Sam 4-6. Since the inscription reads like a contemporary record of the biblical events, the date for the biblical episode can be applied to the time for the writing of this text. From its historical and chronological relations in the Bible, the Battle at Aphek can be dated approximately to the second quarter of the eleventh century, so a similar date can be applied to this text.

This date is a century lower than is commonly applied to this text on the basis of paleography. But dating it in this way follows proper paleographical procedure. Scripts must be dated by inscriptions connected with known and recognizable historical events that can be dated from other sources, not the reverse.²⁶ The fact that this

²⁶The latest example of this kind of difficulty has arisen in connection with the bilingual Aramaic-Akkadian text on the statue from Tell Fekheriyeh. For the original publication of the text, see A. R. Millard and P. Bordreuil, *La statue de*

script looks older than the date for the event which it describes simply means that this archaic script was in use longer than previously recognized.²⁷

History

In terms of historical details, all of the statements made in this brief text can be seen as either confirming or complementing parallel statements made in 1 Sam 4-6. In general, this inscription can be seen as providing convenient summary statements of major events that are elaborated in more detail in the OT passage. They are also given in the same order (with the exception of line 4), as can be seen from the following outline:

Tell Fekheriyeh et sa bilingue assyro-araméene (Paris, 1981). For a popular discussion of its contents, see idem, "A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic Inscriptions," *BA* 45 (1982): 135-141.

While some of the letters in the Aramaic script look old enough to be dated to the eleventh century, we know from the historical contents of the inscription that it should be dated to the ninth century. On the problems of paleography in this text, Millard and Bordreuil have written, "When compared with the earliest Phoenician inscriptions (11th and 10th centuries B.C.) and the other specimens of Old Aramaic, this inscription has a very archaic appearance. There are letter forms unparalleled after the early 10th century B.C. (e.g., *mem* with vertical zig-zag head, triangular tailless *daleth*), and one is without analogy after the 11th century (the 'inverted' *lamedh*). Thus a first glance might lead to dating late in the 11th century B.C. on paleographic criteria. Our analysis of every letter has convinced us this first impression is misleading. . . . Together these features imply that we are faced with a local derivative of the Phoenician alphabet, perhaps adopted as early as 1000 B.C., and which continued in use and produced its unique characteristics. . . ."

"Paleography alone is too uncertain a means for dating the Tell Fekheriyeh inscription; its sources are too meager. In this case we have the evidence of the Assyrian text and script, suggesting a date after 900 B.C., the historical context that is required for the statue, and our argument for the identity of Hadad-yis^{ci}'s father with the eponym of 866 B.C. to weigh beside the vagaries of the Aramaic script. The mid-9th century B.C. date seems inescapable" (Millard and Bordreuil, "Statue," p. 140).

²⁷J. Naveh's precaution is pertinent here. He notes that the writer's "confusion of letters and his mistakes seem to be so serious that I would not recommend the drawing of paleographic conclusions from any of the forms produced by him. We cannot know which letter forms are based on the contemporary scribal traditions and which are the products of either the writer's poor training or his bad memory." Joseph Naveh, "Some Considerations on the Ostrakon from ^cIzbet Şarṭah," *IEJ* 28 (1978): 35. While I would not see as many mistakes in this text as Naveh does, his precaution about its paleographic dating is well taken.

The Ostrakon	The Event	1 Samuel
Line 1	The Battle	4:1-10
Line 2a	Ark Captured	4:11
Line 2b	Removed to Azor	-
Line 2c	Removed to Ashdod	5:1-7
Line 2d	Removed to Gath	5:8-9
Line 3	Returned to Kiriath-yearim	6:21
Line 4	Ark lost; priest killed	4:11-19

Only the fourth line of the text functions in a different way and order from the account in the biblical text, but even here the function is complementary. One difference relates to the report: The inscription refers to a more immediate giving of a report, that which Hophni brought to the elders back at camp, whereas 1 Sam 4:13-17 refers, instead, to the more full and final report given to Eli and the residents at Shiloh after the battle was over. In both instances the same verb, *hgd*, is used to describe the giving of those reports, even though the time and location were different. A second item of contrast is the detail which the ostrakon adds that the Philistines passed by, or stopped at, Azor on their way back from the battle. The biblical record of the travels of the Ark begins with its arrival at Ashdod in Philistia.

With this text focusing indirectly upon the fate of the Ark, a number of facts can be inferred about the Ark in the eleventh century B.C. First, it is evident that such an object was in existence in Israel that early. Second, it can be confirmed that by then, in the period of the Judges, it was headquartered at Shiloh. Third, it can be determined that on one occasion during this period the Ark was temporarily lost to the Philistines, that they carried it to a number of points in their own territory, and that they subsequently returned it. Both from the standpoint of this inscription and 1 Sam 4-7, this was a most remarkable course of events, in which the most sacred object of the Israelites was temporarily lost from their possession.

In terms of the larger picture of international relations in the early eleventh century B.C., this text confirms that a major threat on the political horizon of Israel was the Kittim or Sea Peoples, more specifically the Philistines. By referring to events surrounding the defeat of the Israelites by the Philistines on this occasion, this text provides evidence for the idea that the Philistines had the upper

hand in relations with Israel at this time. This was a problem that the Israelites were not able to solve completely until the time of David.

Supplementary Note

In a recent study of the origins of the alphabet, Brian E. Colless has also taken another close look at the alphabet on the 'Izbet Şarṭah Ostrakon ("Recent Discoveries Illuminating the Origin of the Alphabet," *Abr-Naharain* 26 [1988]: 30-67). Colless has not attempted a translation of the upper lines on the sherd, but he has made some progress in identifying the letters of the alphabetic line.

In the last position before the break in the sherd he has correctly identified a *mem* (with a question mark) and no *nun* preceding it. More importantly, he has noted that two letters were written in the fifth position from the beginning of the alphabet; one above the line, and one below the line. The letter below the line he has correctly identified as a *waw* (with a question mark) and the letter above the line he has suggested as a *mem*. This particular *mem* is unnecessary and anomalous, however, inasmuch as Colless already has a *mem* in this line, thus making this *mem* epigraphically inaccurate.

Closer inspection would have revealed that the letter above the line is a vertical notched *nun*, as I have proposed above. In summary, Colless has achieved the same results that I have here set forth from my examination of the alphabet on the 'Izbet Şarṭah Ostrakon, except that the first of his two *mems* should be read more accurately as a *nun*. His conclusions about this line appear on p. 62 of his article.