

## THE TOMB OF DAVID IN JERUSALEM

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As one of the most important personages of Israel, King David must have been buried in regal style in an imposing tomb. Yet, surprisingly, the tomb where David was buried has not yet been discovered. A traditional location on the new Mount Zion is pointed out as the location of his burial. The upper room where Jesus is supposed to have met with his disciples is upstairs from this tomb. While David may have been buried there, it could only have been a secondary burial, after his body or bones were removed from his original tomb.

The approximate location of David's primary tomb is limited by the geography and history of Jerusalem. The city is built on four hills, one in the southeast, one in the northeast, one in the northwest, and one in the southwest. The southeastern hill, known as Mount Ophel was the first of the four to be occupied. This was the Jebusite city which David conquered as described in 2 Sam 5.

The northeastern hill, today known as the temple mount, was purchased by David and finally built upon by Solomon. Since this hill was not built on until after the death of David, the city of David in which he was buried, according to 1 Kgs 2:10, could not have been located there.

The other two hills of ancient Jerusalem offer even less possibility as the burial site for David. The southwestern hill probably was not incorporated into the city until the time of Hezekiah, when the city was expanded to accommodate refugees after the fall of Samaria after its conquest by the Assyrians. Thus the southwestern hill is even less likely to be the site of David's burial in the "city of David." Finally, the northwestern hill was incorporated into the city even later than the southwestern hill, probably in Roman times or at least between the time of Hezekiah and Roman times.

Thus three out of the four hills of ancient Jerusalem are excluded as possible locations of the tomb of David. The only one that qualifies

as the City of David in which David was buried is Mount Ophel, the southeastern hill, where the city of the Jebusites was located. A large cemetery lies across the Kidron Valley from that hill, but that was not "in" the city of David.

The one ancient cemetery found on Mount Ophel was excavated by Raymond Weill between the two world wars. He advocated that David was buried there, but his suggestion to that effect was ignored and forgotten. In the January-February 1995 issue of the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Hershel Shanks revived the old idea of R. Weill to suggest anew that David was buried in these tombs. While the suggestion sounded reasonable, specific proof was lacking.

From the suggestion in that journal I took a serious interest in this cemetery. Bryant Wood of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, gave me a photograph taken from his visit there in the summer of 1995 (Plate 1). Magnification of that photograph suggested an inscription along the sill of the entryway into the large tomb (on the left in this photograph). Confirmation of that point came with the visit of George Reid to the area in March of 1996. He took a closeup photograph of the door sill of that large tomb, in which the inscription is clearer (Plate 2). The photograph studied below was taken of the left half of the door sill of the large tomb opening. In July 1996 I visited the site. To my reading, the inscription confirms that this is the primary tomb of David, located inside the original city of David.

### *The Inscription*

The shadow of the photographer on Plate 2 actually helps to decipher the inscription. Bright light directly on the rock sometimes makes it difficult to see or read an ancient inscription. Angled light helps to bring out the carvings.

The inscription begins at the upper right corner of Plate 2. Behind it there is a narrow dirt trench, which sets off what was inscribed on the sill from what was further inside of the tomb. The first letter on the upper right is in the form of a fish. That is the letter *dalet*. This letter came into use by taking the first sound of the word for fish, *dag*, and using the fish to stand for it. The principle whereby this transformation took place from pictograph to phonetic grapheme is known as the Rebus Principle.

In this case, the nose of the fish is pointed into the right upper corner at a 45-degree angle. The dorsal fin of the fish was cut down from the edge of the rock. The lower fin is present but not as prominent as the dorsal fin. The upper portion of the tail of the fish is clearly visible, but the lower portion of the fish is not quite so clear.

The use of the full form of the fish for this letter is unusual in the tenth century, the time of David and Solomon. I take it as a deliberate archaism. The inscriber deliberately used an older form of that letter for artistic and aesthetic purposes. The letter at the opposite end of David's name is also a fish, and thus his name is enclosed by two fish, one at each end of his name. The fish at the beginning of his name bends out to the right, and the fish at the other end of his name bends to the left, to a slightly lesser degree.

The next letter in this vocalized name is an A-vowel, represented by an ox-head, *'alep*. The horns of this ox-head parallel the dorsal fin of the fish. The right horn is longer than the left, in the perspective of the artist-inscriber. Both are cut deeply into the rock. The nose of the ox, which is down to the left, was also cut deeply into the rock. From the upper edge of the ox's nose two lighter lines outline the head as they reach up to and across between the two horns. Along the inner edge of these lighter lines are the darker outlines of the eyes of the ox. The left eye is more deeply cut than the right. This gives a clear picture of the ox-head, *'alep*.

The third letter, the middle consonant of David's name is a *waw*. This letter comes partially in its usual form and partially in an unusual form. The usual form is the head of the letter: a semi-circle open toward the top and cut up to the edge of the rock sill, a short space to the left of the horns of the *'alep*. Thus far the letter is normal. The tail of the *waw* is unusual; it curves, first to the left, then directly vertically, and finally back toward the right. In addition to curving, which is not that abnormal, it was written with two lines, not just one, as is customary. These two lines intersect and cross so that the tail of this letter gives the appearance of vines intertwined to make loops. There appear to be four of these loops below the semicircular head. While the loops of this tail are unusual, they do add an artistic touch beyond a simple straight-line tail.

The fourth letter is another vowel: a *yod*. The tail of this *yod* was inscribed with double lines and parallels the second and third loops in the tail of the preceding *waw*. It curves up from the lower left to the upper right. The head was inscribed with two parallel horizontal strokes. Usually by the tenth century the forked head of the *yod* would have angled more to the left, but these strokes are quite sharply left angled. The head of this letter is further down from the edge of the sill than the letters which precede it.

The final letter in David's name here is represented by another fish, which stands vertically across the rock surface. Its head is up and points slightly to the left. Its tail is down, and the left portion of the tail angles

out further than the right portion of the tail. The ventral fin is more prominent than the dorsal fin, and there may possibly be a gill slit outlined in the rock. Taken together, the lines of this fish are more crudely done than are the more gently curved lines of the fish at the beginning of David's name.

The signs are: a fish, an ox-head, a semicircular-headed letter with a twisted tail, a fork-headed letter with a curved tail, and another fish. The letters that these signs represent are: D - 'A - W - Y - D, or *d'awydyd*, which equals David. As the label on this tomb, the name of David is written upon the sill of the opening.

### *The Relief*

To the left of the inscription, there is a representation, a carved relief of a human head. Since the name reads David, the relief may be interpreted as the head of David. It is located in the middle of the sill, with the name extending to the right edge of the tomb opening.

The head is round and curved. It faces left, away from the name, although the eye is eroded, but its shape is still visible. In front of the eye a short forehead angles down to a rather large and crudely incised nose. A short upper lip separates nose and mouth. The mouth extends rather deeply into the jaw and appears to be partially open. An angular chin may suggest a beard. Relatively little of the neck remains; it looks as if there had been two short vertical lines to indicate its location, but these are partly eroded. The back of the head consists of a large curve. There may have been a hairline with some curls incised within that large curve. Sitting on top of the head is something that looks like a crown, outlined by two deep parallel lines, the uppermost of which is more deeply incised. The front part of the crown appears to have been eroded or chipped away. The upper outer edge of the crown appears to have been serrated along the edge. There may have been a design or writing on the crown, but it is not clear enough to read. What is evident from this crown is that a kingly figure is depicted here and identified by name to the right of this relief. The name there, written in large letters, is David.

There may have been some writing below the head on the left and below the name on the right. The eroded writing on the left looks as if it might originally have spelled out the word for king, *melek*, but it is too badly eroded to be certain. On the right side of this panel, some writing may have extended downward from the nose of the '*aleph*. It may have been another occurrence of David's name, but it too is now too badly eroded to read.

*Summary*

On Mount Ophel, the southeastern hill of ancient Jerusalem, there is a cemetery of undetermined age. An early excavator, R. Weill, suggested that here could have been the tomb of David. A magazine article in 1995 revived that suggestion, still without proof. Since that time two of my colleagues have taken improved pictures of this site. I myself have visited the site. One view, taken by Bryant Wood, shows the general area as it has now been cleaned up. The other photograph was specifically taken of the door sill to the largest tomb of the group. An inscription appears there along with a relief. The relief depicts the head of a kingly figure with a crown on his head. The name of that individual is written out to the right of the relief. The name written there is the name of David, which may identify the head in relief and the tomb as belonging to King David. Thus the tomb of David in the city of David (1 Kgs 2:10) has now been identified. Such a reading would permit the identification of the tomb of David in the city of David (1 Kgs 2:10).

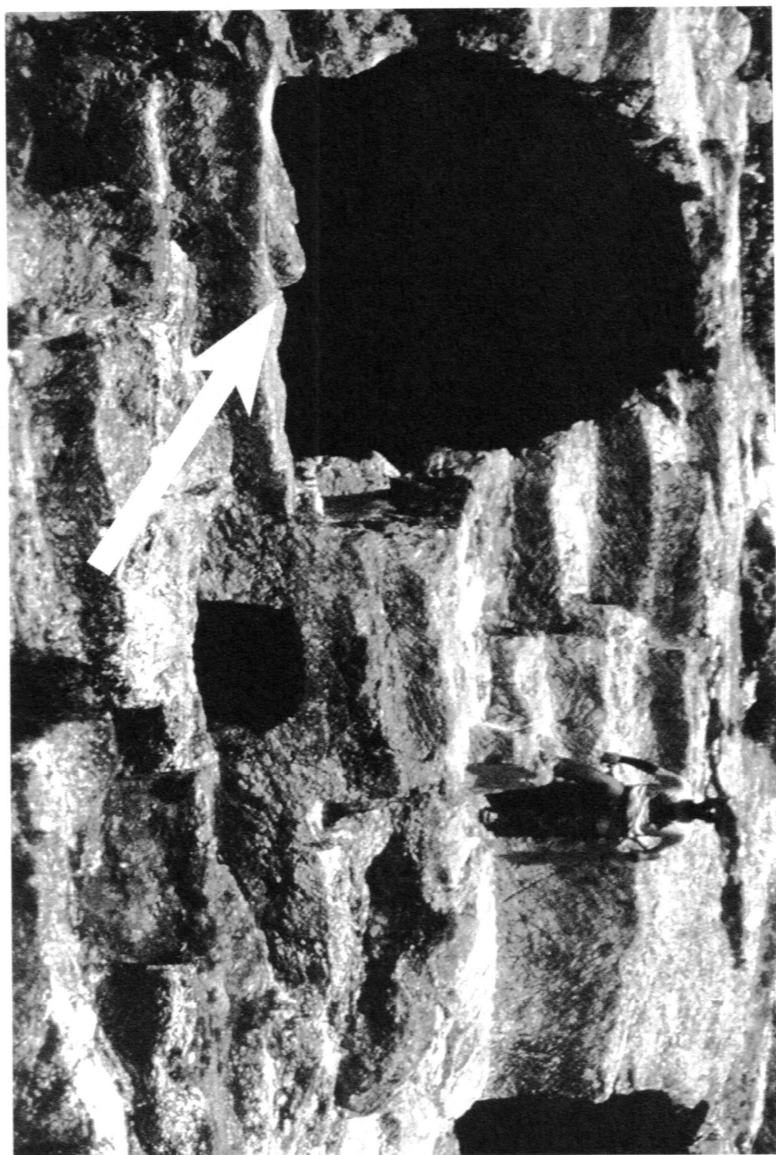
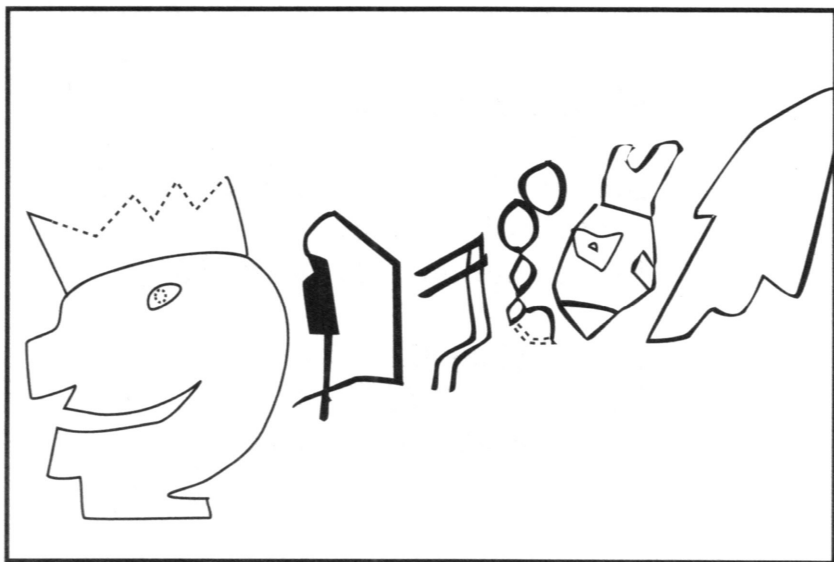
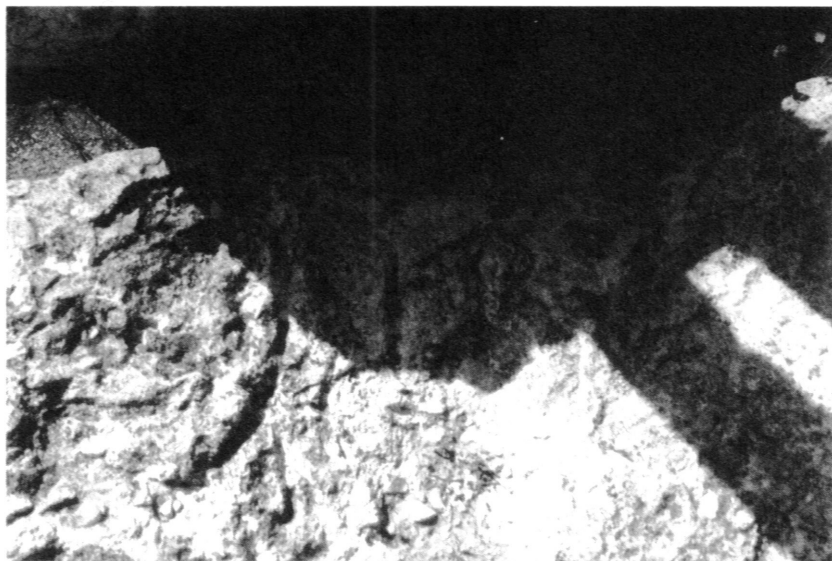


Plate 1. The inscription begins where the arrow points, on the sill of a large tomb opening in an ancient cemetery on Moun-Ophel. Photo by Bryant Wood.



**Plate 2a** The shadow facilitates viewing the inscription on the sill of the large tomb.  
**Plate 2b.** Travis Spore digitized the photo and used the computer to trace the drawing directly from it; he then moved the tracing off the photo. Dotted lines show reconstructions. Original photo by George Reid.