## IS HOPHNI IN THE 'IZBET SARTAH OSTRACON?

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During the 1980s, dramatic discoveries of Northwest-Semitic inscriptions that appear to name biblical persons excited the interest of many biblical scholars. In 1990, as that surge of interest continued, William H. Shea's article, "The 'Izbet Ṣarṭah Ostracon," contended that this ostracon contains a reference to the biblical Hophni ben Eli (1 Sam 1:3; 2:12-34; 4:1-17). Israeli archaeologist Moshe Kochavi listed this article without comment among the references that concluded his encyclopedia article on the ostracon. Earlier, Ronald F. Youngblood's commentary on the books of Samuel had noted Shea's identification cautiously but seemingly with hope that it might be correct. To date, however, there has been no published, specific appraisal of this identification. The potential for an identification of a biblical personage in a late-second-millennium

'See, e.g., the list in T. Schneider, "Six Biblical Signatures," BAR 17 (July-August 1991): 26-33. Before the 1980s, other biblical-era inscriptions that appear to name biblical personages had stirred great excitement in their day—e.g., the Mesha Inscription, discovered in 1868; the seal of Shema, the servant of Jeroboam, discovered in 1904; the seal of Jaazaniah, discovered in 1932; and many Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions (J. A. Dearman, ed., Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab, Archaeology and Biblical Studies, no. 2 [Atlanta: Scholars, 1989]; D. Ussishkin, "Gate 1567 at Megiddo and the Seal of Shema, Servant of Jeroboam," in Scripture and Other Artifacts, ed. M. D. Coogan, J. C. Exum, and L. E. Stager [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994], 410-428; W. F. Badé, "The Seal of Jaazaniah," ZAW 51 [1933]: 150-156; ANET, 3d ed., 272-317, passim). The substantial and growing number of Hebrew and related inscriptions of the biblical era that appear to name persons named in the HB was the stimulus of my work, "Identifying Biblical Persons in Hebrew and Related Inscriptions from before the Persian Era," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, in progress.

<sup>2</sup>AUSS 28 (1990): 59-86; also W. H. Shea, "Ancient Ostracon Records Ark's Wanderings," Ministry, July 1991, 14.

<sup>3</sup>"The Ostracon," E. Stern, ed., New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), s.v. "Izbet Şarţah," 2: 654.

<sup>4&</sup>quot;2 Samuel," Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 3: 596-597, n. 1.

inscription merits a close look at the evidence.

## Provenance, Nationality, and Date

The 'Izbet Sartah ostracon, exhibited in the Pavilion of Hebrew Script and Inscriptions at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem (identification number IDAM 80-1), was discovered in 1976, lying broken in two pieces inside a storage pit among the ruins of an Iron Age village three kilometers east of Tel Aphek.<sup>5</sup> The village was Israelite, "a small, unfortified settlement" containing a "four-room house, typically Israelite in its layout, and the characteristic silos and 'collared-rim' pithoi" that mark Israelite settlements of this era.<sup>6</sup> Given the Israelite character of the site and, in the abecedary of the ostracon, "the letter-sequence pe-'ayin (so far found only in biblical and clearly Hebrew epigraphic sources)," it is very likely that the inscription is Israelite in the sense that its author was an Israelite.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Opposite Tel Aphek on the other side of Aphek Pass, the ruins are on a hill at the west end of a spur of high ground above the Mediterranean coastal plain, near five other Iron-Age sites (I. Finkelstein, 'Izbet Sartah: An Early Iron Age Site Near Rosh Ha'Ayin, Israel, BAR International Series, no. 299 [Oxford, England: BAR, 1986], 1, 202); or see I. Finkelstein, "Izbet Şarţah," ABD 3:588-589). The site has three strata, each dated by ceramics. Stratum III sits on bedrock and extends from the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the twelfth century B.C.E. to the abandonment of the site at the beginning of the eleventh century. Stratum II begins at the late eleventh century; it was occupied for only about one or two decades before its inhabitants abandoned the site. Very soon afterward, during the first half of the tenth century (the beginning of Iron II), a smaller group of people occupied Stratum I for a brief period (ibid., 5).

"Ibid., 3. The site's pottery and architecture, as well as the regional occupation pattern, indicate that the inhabitants were of the hill-country population. Nevertheless, the ceramic evidence also shows contact with the plain-dwellers (M. Kochavi, "An Ostracon of the Period of the Judges from 'Izbet Ṣarṭah," TA 4/1-2 [1977]: 3; Finkelstein, 200-205); see note 18.

<sup>7</sup>A. Demsky, "The 'Izbet Sartah Ostracon Ten Years Later," in Finkelstein, 191. For a fuller treatment of the *pe-'ayin* order, see A. Demsky, "A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and Its Implications for the History of the Alphabet," *TA* 4 (1977): 17-18, 21.

\*Given an approximate twelfth-century date, an Israelite nationality would not at this stage necessarily imply a distinctively Israelite script. The script is Proto-Canaanite, with no particularly Israelite characteristics, though the script of this ostracon might have local variations. Demsky (ibid., 20-21) and Kochavi ("Ostracon of the Period," 3, 12-13) argue for an Israelite nationality of the writer. A. Lemaire concurs in "Abécédaires et exercices d'ecolier en épigraphie nord-ouest sémitique," Journal Asiatique 266 (1978): 223-224. Cross argues against a distinctive Hebrew script in this inscription, thinking that Demsky and Kochavi had made such a claim (F. M. Cross, "Newly Found Inscriptions in Old Canaanite and Early Phoenician scripts," BASOR 238 [Spring 1980]: 13-15). For the reply, see Demsky, "Izbet Sartah Inscription Ten Years Later," 191. Israelite character does not necessarily imply Heb vocabulary and syntax, since it might be simply a penmanship exercise.

Kochavi, taking into account that the location of the site made it "the nearest Israelite neighbor of [Philistine] Aphek, lying on the road leading up to Shiloh," identified 'Izbet Sartah as biblical Ebenezer, "the mustering centre... for the Israelite forces who went forth to battle the Philistine armies assembling at Aphek (1 Sam 4)." This site identification is possible and reasonable, but it lacks conclusive evidence. In any case, the location remains at least near the places named in 1 Sam 4:1-4, namely Aphek, Ebenezer, and Shiloh, which are all mentioned there almost in the same breath as Hophni.

According to paleographic dating, the most likely period (though not the only possible period) for the ostracon is between the late thirteenth century and the end of the twelfth.<sup>10</sup> Such a date apparently makes the writing about a century older than the stratum in which the ostracon was found (Stratum II), dated to one or two decades in the late eleventh century.<sup>11</sup> Jostling by earthquakes or intrusive digging by the inhabitants

<sup>9</sup>Kochavi, "Ostracon of the Period," 3, 12-13; see also the comments and bibliographic citations in Finkelstein, 208.

<sup>10</sup>Current paleographic dating places the script in the late thirteenth to the end of the twelfth centuries, roughly 1230 to 1100 B.C.E. These dates are according to the broad-based chronological chart of second-millennium inscriptions in B. Sass, The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millenium [sic] B.C., Ägypten und altes Testament, Band 13 (Wiesbaden; Harrassowitz, 1988), 155. Kochavi dates the ostracon stratigraphically "to the 12th-11th centuries" and paleographically to ca. 1200 B.C.E. (Kochavi, "Ostracon of the Period," 12). Cross assigns it paleographically "to the 12th century, and probably to the first half of the century to judge from its paleographic development" (Cross, "Newly Found Inscriptions," 12). By making a few paleographic comparisons, Demsky accepts a broad twelfth-century date (Demsky, "Proto-Canaanite Abecedary," 14 and 14, n. 1). It is very important to remember that second-millennium paleographic chronology lacks absolute dates. Paleographic typology enables the arrangement of inscriptions in a time sequence relative to each other, but the arrangement can be expanded or squeezed across the years like accordion pleats; there is at least one century of flexibility, even at the end of the second millennium. In other words, paleography is useful for saying that one inscription is older or younger than another, but it is not infallible in the dates it assigns, especially within the second millennium B.C.E. Paleographers may attempt to absolutize more precise dates, but it is very difficult to do so on paleographic grounds, because it remains unknown how rapidly or slowly second-millennium letter shapes developed (Sass, 152-154). For Sass' paleographic basis for relative dating of the 'Izbet Sartah ostracon, see ibid., 147-148.).

<sup>11</sup>The ostracon was found in Stratum II (ca. 1025-1005 B.C.E.) in one of 43 underground storage pits, specifically pit no. 605. Two facts are noteworthy for dating: (a) Stones from the walls of Stratum II were later removed and reused in Stratum I (Finkelstein, "Izbet Sartah," in Stern, 2:653). (b) Strata I and II have the same pottery types, and they are distinguishable only by "statistical analysis of the quantitative variance between the different types" (ibid.). In other words, after the brief abandonment between Strata II and I, the inhabitants of Stratum I disturbed Stratum II and could have left Stratum I materials in it which would not be distinguishable from the original Stratum II materials. Therefore, the ostracon could have been left in the pit as late as the earlier half of the tenth century.

of Strata I or II could have moved the ostracon up from Stratum III into the Stratum II pit. By considering the paleography in light of the habitation of the site, one arrives at a range of most favored dates from 1200 to 1100 B.C.E., with the likelihood of an earlier or a later date decreasing as it moves away from the twelfth century. Therefore, a date in the first half of the eleventh century is only somewhat less likely, and that could place it around the time of the biblical Hophni. 13

## Ambiguities and Uncertainties in the Ostracon

Despite these apparently promising circumstances, the ostracon presents those who would read it with difficulties, including some at the most basic levels of intelligibility.

- 1. The number of letters in lines 1-4 of the inscription. The total perceived varies by over 30 percent (see table 1). The shallowness of the slight scratches that form the letters in lines 1-4 has produced much uncertainty regarding their presence and identity.<sup>14</sup>
  - 2. The identity of many of the letters in the inscription (see table 2)
- 3. The question of whether the inscription contains words, or only lines of letters.<sup>15</sup>

Further, "It is important to remember that the contents of the Stratum II silos do not necessarily belong to this stratum, particularly as no complete vessels were found in them. It is possible that in one way or another older sherds penetrated into the silos, and even more likely that sherds from Stratum I fell into them, particularly since some of them may have been reused at that time" (Finkelstein, 20). Therefore, although the ostracon could be dated as early as the late thirteenth century, it would be stratigraphically more likely that it would come from the late eleventh to early tenth centuries B.C.E.

<sup>12</sup>The decreasing likelihood is due to the improbability of Stratum III occupation of the site before 1230 and after 1050. On the chronology of the occupation of the site, see Finkelstein, 206-210.

<sup>13</sup>Hophni's death preceded Saul's reign. The rough estimate of when that reign began is made by counting back from the beginning of David's reign over Judah, ca. 1010 B.C.E. The Jewish tradition found in Acts 13:21 and Jos., Ant., 6.378, assigns a forty-year reign to Saul (but Josephus also says "twenty years" in Ant., 10.143). Forty could be a round figure representing a generation (Cundall in A. E. Cundall and L. Morris, Judges and Ruth, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1971), 32-33. The two-year reign of Saul mentioned in the corrupt text of 1 Sam 13:1 is not possible.

<sup>14</sup>Kochavi, "Ostracon of the Period," 4; A. Demsky and M. Kochavi, "An Alphabet from the Days of the Judges," *BAR* 4 (September-October 1978): 24-25. Colless, who makes use of the abecedary only (line 5), comments, "No attempt will be made to draw this entire document here; too many of its characters are indistinct" (B. E. Colless, "Recent Discoveries Illuminating the Origin of the Alphabet," *Abr-Nahrain* 26 [1988]: 61-62).

<sup>15</sup>Most of the scholars cited consider the ostracon a penmanship exercise containing four lines of letters written at random plus an abecedary in the fifth line (Cross, "Newly

- 4. The question of whether lines 1-4 of the inscription are a coherent text composed of words in syntactical relationships <sup>16</sup> (Line 5 is universally recognized to be an abecedary.)
- 5. The language (Hebrew, another Canaanite dialect, or perhaps the language of the Philistines) in which such a potential text might be written<sup>17</sup>
  - 6. The order in which the lines were written or are to be read<sup>18</sup>
  - 7. The inclusion of personal names<sup>19</sup>
  - 8. The presence, letter identity, and letter order of the perceived

Found Inscriptions," 8-9; Demsky, "Proto-Canaanite Abecedary," 19; Kochavi, "Ostracon of the Period," 12; Lemaire, 225; J. Naveh, "Some Considerations on the Ostracon from 'Izbet Ṣarṭah," *IEJ* 28 (1978): 31; Sass, 67). Dotan and Shea are exceptional in this respect (A. Dotan, "New Light on the 'Izbet Ṣarṭah Ostracon, *TA* 8 [1981]: 160-171 and Shea, 59-86).

<sup>16</sup>Only two scholars have published attempts to demonstrate that lines 1-4 of this inscription are a coherent, intelligible text composed of words in syntax: Dotan, 160-171; and Shea, 59-86. The basic assumption of both translations, that the inscription is an intelligible text, is itself strongly challenged by the almost total difference between the translations. While offering syntactical alternatives that modify the following reading, Dotan translates the non-abecedary lines in the order in which he thinks they were written and should be read (168; see n. 19 below):

line 4: 'rp the son of hg brought to hd a skin-bottle [of drink and food] for the hungry.

line 2: garments of animal leather brought to 'dnb'l (ind. obj.) tt (subj.).

line 3: pure wool. line 1: to [so-and-so] brought [someone].

Shea, 62, translates:

line 1: Unto the field we came  $\ /\$ , (unto) Aphek from Shiloh.

line 2: The Kittim took (it and) came to Azor, / (to) Dagon lord of Ashdod, (and to) Gath. line 3: (It returned to) Kiriath-Jearim.

line 4: The companion of the footsoldiers, Hophni, came to tel/l the elders, "a horse has come (and) upon (it was my) brother for us to bury."

<sup>17</sup> Kochavi has suggested that the first four lines of the inscription might be a Philistine text (Sass, 66). Naveh allowed for the "faint possibility that this ostracon may have been written by a Philistine" (Naveh, "Some Considerations," 35). On Philistine inscriptions, see F. M. Cross, "A Philistine Ostracon from Ashkelon," BAR 22 (January-February 1996): 64-65; A. Kempinski, "Some Philistine Names from the Kingdom of Gaza," IEJ 37 (1987): 20-24; J. Naveh, "Writing and Scripts in Seventh-Century B.C.E. Philistia: The New Evidence from Tel Jemmeh," IEJ 35 (1985): 8-21, Pl 2-4; see n. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Dotan considered the location and extent of the lines on the sherd and concluded that they had been written in this order: lines 5, 4, 2, 3, and then 1 (Dotan, 168-169). This order might have been influenced, even unconsciously, by Dotan's understanding of the inscription as a coherent, meaningful text. Four years earlier, Kochavi had claimed that the lines were written in a different order: 5, 4, 1, 2, and then 3; he based his argument on the clearer physical appearance of line 5 (i.e., the abecedary) and how lines 1-4 occupy the space on the sherd, not on any perceived textual meaning of the letters (Kochavi, "Ostracon of the Period," 4-5). Following convention, Shea reads lines 1-5 in top-to-bottom order (Shea, 62).

<sup>19</sup>Dotan finds five personal names; Shea finds one (see n. 16). No one else has claimed in print to have found any.

sequence *heth*, *pe*, and *nun* in the first part of line 4<sup>20</sup> (read from left to right in the inscription and in table 2)

9. The question of whether the perceived letter sequence *heth*, *pe*, and *nun* forms a common noun or a proper noun.

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	Kochavi	Cross	Dotan & Sass	Shea
line 1	10	12	11	15
line 2	17	18	17	25
line 3	6	6	6	8
line 4	28	28	28	33
	±	±	+	<u>+</u>
totals of lines 1-4	61	64	62	81
line 5	22	22	22	22
	<u>+</u>	±	±	±
totals of lines 1-5	83	86	84	103

 $<sup>^{20}</sup>$ The final form of the letter nun is not used in the inscription; therefore it is not used here.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Kochavi, "Ostracon of the Period," 4; Cross, "Newly Found Inscriptions," 9; Dotan, 167; Sass, 67; Shea, 62.

TABLE  $2^{22}$ 

A Comparison of Letters Read from the 'Izbet Sartah Ostracon

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5	(Only in this table, letters are to be read from left to right, as in the inscription.		ت	ΞΞ	<u></u>	ت ،	•		Ľ	Ľ	C	C	Ľ		១	<u>:::</u>	១	១	æ
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<sup>22</sup>Kochavi, "Ostracon of the Period," 5; Cross, "Newly Found Inscriptions," 9; Dotan, 161; Sass, 67; Shea, 62. Shea "compared the published photographs and line drawings of the ostracon with the sherd itself as it is displayed in its cabinet in the Israel Museum" (ibid.), published transcriptions documents the difficulty of distinguishing between beth and lamedb, mem and shin, gopb and resh, yodh and tsadhe, and, most importantly for the name Hophni (which Shea finds in line 4 before the break), the difficulty of telling the difference between whereas Sass used a microscope and various lighting conditions to examine the ostracon (Sass, 66-68). In lines 1-4 of table 2, the variety of gimel and pe.

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# Key to Table 2

- A slash mark between two letters indicates that they are alternative identities for a single letter, as the scholar perceives it.
- / The solitary slash mark indicates the location of the break between the two pieces of the ostracon.
- A question mark after a letter means this letter's identity is considered uncertain by the scholar.
- [8] A bracketed letter is one that has been supplied by the scholar.
- [?] A question mark within brackets indicates that a letter is perceived by the scholar, but its identity is unknown.
- [] A bracketed space indicates a space capable of holding at least one letter, as seen by Cross or Shea. (The other scholars make no such note.)
- The only underlined letters are Shea's reading of the name Hophni in line 4a, read from left to right in this table only, as in the inscription itself.

Regarding points 8 and 9 above, only Shea finds the name Hophni (in the first part of line 4; see table 2).<sup>23</sup> The *heth* is read by all. The other scholars, however, find only one other letter, not two, between the *heth* and the 'aleph. It could be pe or gimel, which closely resemble each other, and here it is difficult to distinguish between them. Shea reads this letter next to the *heth* as a pe. He also finds a nun, henceforth called Shea's nun, lying slightly above this pe:

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 [Cross, 8]. 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 'aleph below. Thus the stance of the nun is horizontal, like the nun with the verb in the first line.

Shea further points out that the "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."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup>Shea, 77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup>Shea, 77; pictures from Demsky, 190, pl. 12; Kochavi, "Ostracon of the Period," pl. 1. For the source of Shea's data, see the note accompanying Table 2 above.

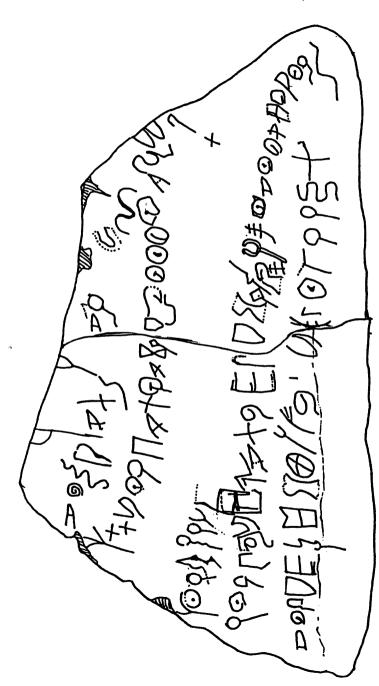


Figure 1. Drawing of 'Izbet Şarţah Ostracon (by William H. Shea).

Shea is to be commended for his diligence in observing and recording every possible letter on the ostracon. He could be correct regarding a nun over the pe. Precisely at the point where Shea's alleged nun touches the preceding heth, however, there appears in Shea's own drawing a line extending upward within the heth, producing an alternative possible letter having the shape of an English w. This could be the letter shin as it appears in line 1, third letter, in the table published by Kochavi<sup>25</sup> and also, with approval, by Sass, <sup>26</sup> except for its being rotated. Their sketches of shin in line 1 have rather straight strokes, although not as straight as the strokes of the shin that appears in Shea's drawing. Another difficulty is presented by the fact that Shea's alleged nun, which may also be read as shin, appears over the gimel or pe. <sup>27</sup> Therefore, it could be inserted either before or after the pe. Alternatively, the other scholars could be correct, and this nun or shin might not be a letter, but random strokes or accidental scratches.

The foregoing discussion of Shea's reading of IDIT has produced the following possible combinations as potentially valid readings (read here from right to left):

חפש חפנ חגש חגנ חג חשפ חנפ חשג חנג חפ

Once again, the ambiguities of the ostracon triumph: Shea's reading is only one of ten fairly equal possibilities.

Shea interpreted his reading not as the common noun pin, meaning "hollow of the hand," but as a personal name. Even if his reading and interpretation of the perceived letters as a personal name were demonstrably correct, there is still not enough intelligible information in the inscription to specify a particular Hophni. There could easily have been dozens of Hophnis in that time and place. Of those dozens, fewer would have had a father named Eli, but it would be unwarranted to assume that there was only one Hophni ben Eli. If the inscription had specified that the alleged "Hophni" was a son of the particular Eli who was "the priest," there would be little doubt that the ostracon would indeed refer to the biblical Hophni. But such information is not present. There is no patronym to distinguish the "Hophni" of the ostracon as a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup>Kochavi, "Ostracon of the Period," 7, fig. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup>Sass, 185, table 6; fig. 175 among the plates.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup>Cf. another scholar's perception of one letter placed directly over another, in line 5: like Shea, Colless reads two letters, one over the other, following the *he* of the abecedary. Colless, however, reads *mem* over *waw*, whereas Shea reads *nun* over *waw* (Colless, 62; Shea, 62, 63, 86).

son of anyone in particular, let alone a man named Eli, let alone someone named Eli who was "the priest" referred to in 1 Samuel.<sup>28</sup>

#### Conclusion

Although scholars are free to interpret the 'Izbet Sartah Ostracon in various ways, the present degree of knowledge of second-millennium-B.C.E. Northwest-Semitic inscriptions does not permit us to demonstrate it to be anything more than a five-line penmanship exercise written by someone practicing the Proto-Canaanite alphabet. Indeed, it is safe to say that it is nothing more than a penmanship exercise consisting of random letters in lines 1-4 and an abecedary in line 5. To present-day scholars who attempt to read it as a text of words in syntax, the 'Izbet Sartah ostracon exhibits, conceptually, a hierarchy consisting of uncertainties and ambiguities building on other uncertainties and ambiguities, including several at the most basic levels of assumptions required for intelligibility. For this overall reason and the nine specific reasons listed above, the reading of the name Hophni, although possible, is doubtful in the extreme. Beyond the unlikelihood of such a reading, even if it were known for certain that this personal name appears on the ostracon, the lack of a patronym and the absence or indecipherability of other information make any sure identification impossible.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> This article applies the reasonable criteria for making identifications presented by N. Avigad, "On the Identification of Persons Mentioned in Hebrew Epigraphic Sources," *EI* 18 (1987): 235-237 (in Hebrew).