

CHAPTER II HEBREW EPIGRAPHIC SOURCES

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PALESTINE IS A country considered poor in epigraphic finds, particularly during the formative period for the western Semitic alphabetic script which preceded the Israelite Monarchy. The number of decipherable Proto-Canaanite inscriptions of the pre-Monarchy period is extremely small (see *Patriarchs*, chap. III).

By the 11th century B.C.E., early in the Israelite Monarchy, the linear Canaanite alphabetic script had become the standard, best exemplified by the 10th century B.C.E. Phoenician inscriptions from Byblos. This script was also common to Hebrews and Arameans. From about the 8th century B.C.E. onwards, however, developmental differences began to be noticeable in the Phoenician, Hebrew, and Aramaic scripts. The Hebrew script underwent fewer changes than the others, remaining substantially unaltered until the early 6th century B.C.E., when certain letters, as a result of a more cursive writing style, changed slightly.

The period of the Monarchy in Israel and Judah has also yielded relatively few epigraphic finds pertaining to Palestinian history and culture, in contrast to the wealth of such material in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The books of the Bible, on the other hand, provide not only abundant source material but also a means of understanding the Hebrew inscriptions which have survived. Discoveries in recent years have considerably increased the corpus of Hebrew inscriptions from the time of the Monarchy, thus widening the base for the study of Hebrew epigraphy.

Epigraphic material is important mainly because it is an authentic source, contemporary with the events preserved in the inscriptions, which reflect various aspects of life in the Land of Israel. It sometimes complements the biblical sources or sheds light on a particular point. Inscriptions are, of course, also a first-hand tool for the study of script and language.

The epigraphic sources can be divided into categories, according to content, form, and purpose:

1. Monumental inscriptions carved in stone and intended for public display, such as commemorative burial inscriptions, dedications, etc.;
2. Documents written on papyrus;
3. Ostraca written on pottery sherds, used as letters, tags, invoices, receipts, accounts, lists, etc.;
4. Short inscriptions on complete pottery vessels or on other objects, indicating ownership, contents, capacity, etc.;
5. Seals and seal impressions.

A. MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTIONS

The epigraphic finds show that, in contrast to other peoples, the Hebrews did not customarily set up monumental inscriptions, either in tombs or other public places. They apparently had no interest in perpetuating names and events by carving them in stone, which is why no true Hebrew lapidary script was developed and why the formal cursive was used in most carved monumental inscriptions. Future discoveries may, however, lead to a different interpretation.

The earliest Hebrew inscription thus far discovered is the Gezer Calendar.¹ It is incised on a small stone slab in a lapidary script very like that of the early Byblos inscriptions (10th century B.C.E.), except that the letter *kaf* is more developed. Historically, the inscription can be attributed to the period between Solomon's rule in Gezer and the conquest of the town by Shishak king of Egypt, in the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign, i.e., in the second half of the 10th century B.C.E.

The inscription contains a list of months arranged according to the chronological order of agricultural activity, from the "months of harvest" (*yrhw 'sp*) and the "months of sowing" (*yrhw zr'*) to the "month of summer fruit" (*yrh qš*), and ends with what appears to be the name of the scribe, 'by It has therefore been called an "agricultural calendar." If we accept the usual interpretation of *yrhw* "two months," we have a 12-month agricultural calendar, with four double (*yrhw*) and four single (*yrh*) months. Some scholars consider this inscription a peasant's record or a schoolboy's exercise, but knowledge of writing was probably not so widespread in this early period that a peasant could keep such records. It therefore seems likely that the Gezer Calendar, in spite of its small size and careless, irregular script, was intended for some official purpose.

No 9th-century monumental commemorative inscriptions have as yet been discovered in Palestine, but any that did exist must have been similar in language and script to that of the Moabite Mesha Stele (see below). Nor have the following centuries yielded any such royal commemorative inscriptions. This may be accidental, and perhaps their existence can be inferred from a fragment of stone slab

found in Samaria, on which one word 'šr "which" or "who," has survived, carved in unusually large letters. (It has been suggested that this fragment should be completed to read: "[The stele] which [X king of Israel erected]").² It is also possible, however, that the kings of Israel and Judah did not follow the example of other monarchs by immortalizing their deeds on monuments.

This view is partly confirmed by the Siloam Tunnel Inscription, which was carved on the rock wall of the tunnel near the place where the Gihon spring flows into the pool of Siloam. The inscription was discovered accidentally in 1880 by a boy swimming in the pool and contains six lines of fine calligraphic script in formal cursive style, although it is carved in stone:³

... the tunnel. And this was the matter of the tunnel: While [the hewers wielded] the axe(s), each man towards his fellow, and while there were still three cubits to be he[ar]d a man's voice calling to his fellow; for there was a fissure(?) in the rock on the right and [on the left]. And on the day it was tunnelled through, the hewers struck [the rock], each man towards his fellow, axe against axe. And the water flowed from the spring towards the pool for one thousand and two hundred cubits. And a hundred cubits was the height of the rock above the head(s) of the hewers.

This is undoubtedly the tunnel built by Hezekiah king of Judah, who was preparing for the Assyrian siege of 701 B.C.E. by bringing the waters of the Gihon spring into the city (II Chron. 32:2, 30; II Kings 20:20). This is a unique case of the archaeological and epigraphic evidence fully confirming a contemporary event recorded in the Bible.

Since the first early Hebrew inscription to be discovered in the last century was the one at the Siloam pool, it became the cornerstone of Hebrew epigraphy. It has remained unique among Hebrew inscriptions not only as to length and elegance of script and language, but as to exact dating. It is, moreover, the only Hebrew inscription which can be considered both royal and commemorative, intended as it was to memorialize the king's great national engineering feat.

Contrary to the custom in the ancient world, however, the inscription does not glorify the achievement of the king, but the work of the hewers, their excitement, and the successful completion of the undertaking. The inscription was certainly carved by order of the same royal authority responsible for the tunnel enterprise. That the king is not mentioned, therefore, implies democracy in certain customs in the kingdom of Judah. It is unfortunate that the king is not mentioned in such a commemorative inscription, even as a date reference, a lack of calendaric awareness characteristic of all Hebrew inscriptions. The biblical narrative in the present instance, however, supplies the exact date of hewing the tunnel and carving the inscription: just before 701 B.C.E., during the reign of Hezekiah.

It should be pointed out that since the inscription was not intended for the general public its purpose is almost unfathomable. It could be seen only by somebody walking in the water and even so was all but impossible to read in the darkness of the tunnel.

BURIAL INSCRIPTIONS

Only a few burial inscriptions have survived from the time of the Monarchy. One complete and three fragmentary inscriptions were discovered in the village of Silwan near Jerusalem, and three in the Hebron region. Another was incised in a burial cave in the Lachish region, but its contents suggest that it is not funerary.

A necropolis of the First Temple Period is hewn into the rocky cliffs of the village of Silwan on the eastern scarp of the Kidron Valley, opposite the City of David. The nature of both the tombs and the inscriptions indicate that persons of high rank were buried here. Architecturally, the most impressive is the monolith known as the "Tomb of Pharaoh's daughter," which resembles an Egyptian shrine surmounted by a pyramid. Only one complete letter and half of a second survive of the Hebrew inscription over the entrance.

Another monolithic tomb, damaged by time, has yielded two inscriptions discovered in 1870 by Clermont-Ganneau, who, after trying unsuccessfully to decipher them, had them excised and removed to the British Museum. They were deciphered in 1953 by the present writer.

The larger inscription,⁴ above the entrance, consists of three lines and refers to the burial of a person of whose name only the ending *-yahu* has survived. His title was 'āšer 'al ha-bāyit, "he who is over the house," one of the most important officials at the royal court. It reads:

This is [the sepulchre of . . .] *yahu* who is over the house. There is no silver and no gold here, but [his bones] and the bones of his maidservant with him. Cursed be the man who will open this.

Such texts directed against potential tomb-robbers, are common among Phoenician sepulchral inscriptions. The warning "he who will open" also appears in another fragmentary inscription carved on a tomb nearby. It is somewhat surprising to learn that a high royal official was buried with his maidservant, who is mentioned in the burial inscription, even though the Hebrew 'āmāh (maidservant) of biblical times sometimes achieved an honored position in the family.⁵

The evidence strongly suggests that this may be the tomb of "Shebna who is over the house" (here called by his full name Shebanyahu), an official prominent at Hezekiah's court. Isaiah, one of Shebna's political opponents, calls him *sōkēn* and rebukes him: "What have you to do here and whom have you here, that

you have hewn here a tomb for yourself, you who hew a tomb on the height, and carve a habitation for yourself in the rock?" (Isa. 22:16). Some commentators believe that Shebna was a foreigner in the service of the king. He is the only official to whom the Bible assigns the title *sōkēn*, although it is common in Phoenician inscriptions. The architectural style of the Silwan tombs, furthermore, shows a marked Phoenician influence.

Beside the large inscription was another of one line only, apparently referring to the second chamber in the same tomb. Of this inscription only the right-hand portion has survived:

... *hḏr bktp hsr*, "(tomb) chamber in the side of the rock."⁶

Ussishkin proposes to complete the last word to read *hṣr[h]* "rock-cut tomb," thus interpreting the inscription as follows: "(burial) chamber in the side of the rock-cut tomb."⁷ The use of *heder* (chamber) in the sense of burial chamber is repeated in the inscription below. In the Bible the word *sāriah* is a synonym for a rock-hewn cave (I Sam. 13:6; Judg. 9:46-49) and in Nabatean inscriptions a rock-hewn burial chamber. The royal official was apparently buried in the main chamber, his maidservant in the side room. The longer inscription, in which both are mentioned, refers therefore to the whole tomb.

The script of the longer inscription closely resembles that of the Siloam Tunnel and can thus be dated to about 700 B.C.E. It contains the earliest example of the use of internal *matres lectionis* (*ʾārūr*, "cursed"), historically important in terms of Hebrew orthography.

Three inscriptions attributed to the mid-7th century B.C.E. have been discovered in burial caves near Khirbet el-Qom in the Hebron area. One is three lines long and reads: *ʿwpy bn ntnyhwh hḏr hzh*, "Belonging to Ophai son of Nethanyahu (is) this chamber."⁸ A certain Ephai the Nethophathite is mentioned in Jer. 40:8, where the name is spelled *ʿwpy* (*qere*: *ʿypy*). The inscription and the Septuagint support the reading Ophai. *Heder* here clearly means tomb-chamber, as it does in the short inscription in the tomb of the royal officer.

Another inscription⁹ in the same tomb, written in black paint, apparently refers to Ophai's brother: *ʿzḥ bn ntnyhwh*, "Belonging to Uzzah son of Netanyahu" (thus according to Barag,¹⁰ as against the excavator's reading "[Belonging] to 'O . . . , the daughter of Netanyahu").

The possessive *lamed* prefixed to the names of the deceased is of particular interest, since it is the first known instance of *lamed* in the sense of "belonging to" in such tomb inscriptions, and may contribute to better understanding of similar locutions in hitherto controversial inscriptions.

A longer inscription discovered in a tomb nearby consists of four fairly carelessly incised lines, which, because of numerous scratches, have not yet been wholly deciphered.¹¹ According to Dever, the first line reads [*l*]'ryhw hqšb ktbh,

"[Belonging to] Uriahu. Be careful of his inscription." Cross and the present writer prefer: *'ryhw hsr ktbh*, "Uriahu the prince wrote it."¹² The second line is clear: *brk 'ryhw lyhw*, "Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh," a blessing formula used in the Bible. The third line is difficult, perhaps referring to the burial, and the last line mentions *l'nyhw*, "belonging to Oniyahu," a name difficult to explain here.

A group of significant graffiti was discovered in an Iron Age burial cave at Khirbet Beit Lei, east of Lachish.¹³ Here too the inscriptions are so carelessly incised and defaced by lines and scratches that decipherment is very difficult. Naveh reads one of them as follows: *yhw h'ly h'rs hry yhd lw l'ly yršlm*, "Yahweh (is) the God of the whole earth; the mountains of Judah belong to him, to the God of Jerusalem." This is the first time Jerusalem appears on an inscription. One of the many problems is the abbreviated Aramaic form of "Judah" (*yhd*), used only in the Persian period.

Cross proposes a different reading, which bears witness to the problems of decipherment:¹⁴ *'ny yhw h'lyk 'rsh 'ry yhdh wg'ly yršlm*, "I am Yahweh thy God; I will accept the cities of Judah and will redeem Jerusalem." Naveh very tentatively suggests that the second inscription, incised below the first, should read: *hmuryh 'th hmt nwh yh yhw*, "The (Mount of) Moriah Thou hast favored, the dwelling of Yah, Yahweh." Cross, on the other hand, proposes: *nqh yh 'l hnn nqh yh yhw*, "Absolve (us) O Merciful God! Absolve (us) O Yahweh!" Both readings are admittedly uncertain. These are, in any case, not funerary inscriptions, but expressions of faith, concerns about the fate of Jerusalem and Judah, and prayers. The language is poetic and biblical and the inscriptions may have been written by refugees hiding in the burial cave from the Babylonians who conquered Judah and Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. The palaeographic analysis corresponds to this late date.

B. INSCRIPTIONS ON PAPYRUS

Although the Hebrews seem not to have erected many monumental stelae, most of them knew how to write. One needs only the evidence of the Bible, the apocryphal books originally written in Hebrew, and the historical books that have been lost. But since the usual writing material was perishable papyrus, none of the books, scrolls, or documents written during the Monarchy has survived. Perhaps they will be found some day, as unexpectedly as were the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Second Temple Period. Some substantiation for this is offered by a papyrus fragment discovered in 1952 in Wadi Murabʿat.¹⁵ It is a palimpsest and consists of a letter in 8th-century Hebrew script, of which two lines have survived, overwritten by a list of names and figures. The letter reads: *'mr . . . yhw*.

lk. [3]lh. šlh. 't. šlm bytk w't. 'l. tšm' lk[l] dbr 'šr ydbr. 'lyk, "Says . . . yahu to you I send my salutations to your family. And now, do not listen to eve[ry] word said to you."

Impressions of Hebrew seals on bits of clay used to seal documents also testify to the use of papyrus in the First Temple Period. More than twenty such sealings have been found in excavations, mainly at Lachish; many recent finds have not yet been published. They bear the names of the seal owners and the reverse carries the imprint of the papyrus fibers of the documents to which they had been attached.

C. OSTRACA

Potsherds were cheap and easily available and were therefore used as writing material more frequently than papyrus. Inscribed potsherds (ostraca) served for letters, receipts, lists of names, and other short documents.¹⁶ They were usually written in ink with a pen, though some are incised. Because ink is easily effaced, many ostraca are illegible, but because pottery is durable, ostraca constitute the bulk of the epigraphic material found in excavations. Groups of ostraca differing in character and content have been found at Samaria, Arad, and Lachish.

1. THE SAMARIA OSTRACA

The Harvard Expedition of 1910 excavated 63 ostraca in the royal store-room at Samaria, which record consignments of oil and wine, apparently taxes in kind.¹⁷ The fine regular script, the use of almost identical formulae, and the fact that several of the ostraca often form part of the same jar, all signify documents not sent to Samaria from various places, but receipts written in the royal store-rooms when the delivery arrived. The ostraca fall into two categories, according to contents and text formulae:

a. A group of 24 ostraca recording a date (in words), a place-name, a personal name, and the contents of the consignment. Two ostraca will serve as examples:

No. 10: bšr. hš't. myst. l'hn'm. nbl. yn. yšn, "In the ninth year. From Yašit. (Belonging) to Ahino'am. A jar of old wine."

No. 18: bšr. h'srt. mšrt. lgyw. nbl. šmn. ršs, "In the tenth year. From Hase-roth. (Belonging) To Gaddiyau. A jar of fine oil."

b. A group of 28 ostraca, recording a date (in numerals), the name of a region, two or three personal names, and the name of a village or private estate (the nature of the goods is not indicated). The following ostraca will serve as examples:

No. 23: bšr. 7 7 7 mšlq l's. 'hmlk. hš. mšrt, "In the year 7 7 7. From Heleq. (Belonging) To 'Isha', Ahimelek, Heleš. From Hase-roth."

No. 31: bšr. h 7 7 mšyd. l'hs. 'pšh b'l. zkr, "In the year 7 7 7. From Shemida'. (Belonging) To Heleš, 'Ašah, Ba'ala, Zakkur."

Another ostrakon (no. 63) has different numerals.

Scholars differ in their interpretation of two points essential to an understanding of these documents: 1) the meaning of the *lamed*, always prefixed to one (sometimes two) of the names; 2) the meaning of the numerals indicating the date in the second group.

The *lamed* has generally been interpreted as 'l, "to," signifying the recipient of the taxes.¹⁸ No. 18 should therefore be read: "In the tenth year [of king . . .] was sent from Hase-roth [place-name] to Gaddiyau [the official to whom the taxes were sent], a jar of fine oil." No. 23: "In the year [of king . . .] was sent from Heleq [name of a region] to 'Isha' [son of] Ahimelek [the official], by Heleš [the sender], from Hase-roth [place-name]."

This interpretation runs into difficulties, because, as previously explained, the ostraca probably did not accompany the consignments but were written at the royal storehouse when the commodities were received. These are not dispatch documents in the form "sent from . . . to . . .," but records of the receipt of merchandise in the form "delivered, received from. . .," "belonging to . . ." Aharoni¹⁹ and Rainey²⁰ have recently defended the older interpretation "from . . . to . . ." Unlike Aharoni, however, Rainey believes that the goods were sent not to tax collectors but to pensioners and others with a claim on the crown, who were beneficiaries of royal favor, and were granted a fixed income out of taxes paid to the king. Rainey thinks that the *lamed* before the names means "sent to . . .," "gave to . . ." But no verb precedes the *lamed*, and the accepted principle in Hebrew epigraphy is that *lamed* prefixed to a proper noun not preceded by a verb should be considered possessive. Numerous examples are offered by inscriptions on seals, jars, and tombs.

Basing his argument on this epigraphic principle, Yadin explains the *lamed* in the Samaria ostraca as "belonging to," "of," and referring to tax payers.²¹ According to Yadin, "persons like Gaddiyau, Heleš, Shemaryau, etc. were not court officials or tax collectors, but rather owners of big estates," the producers of the wine or oil sent to the palace. The ostraca should therefore be translated: "In the tenth year received from Hase-roth [a place], belonging to Gaddiyau, a jar of fine oil." And: "In the year 7 7 7, received from Heleq [region], belonging to 'Isha', Ahimelek and Heleš [joint owners of the shipment] from Hase-roth [place]."

This interpretation of the *lamed* is supported by two other recently published inscriptions: the tomb inscription from Khirbet el-Qom mentioned above, "Belonging to Ophai (l'wpy) son of Netanyahu [is] this chamber," the *lamed*

signifying ownership of the tomb; and the inscription on a decanter discussed below: *lyhzyhw yyn khl*, "Belonging to Yahzeyahu, wine of *khl*." It must be noted, however, that none of the proposed theories adequately solves all the formulae.

The signs $\neg\lambda$ on the second group of ostraca are usually interpreted as $5 + 10$ (that is, the numeral 15), following Noth, who considered these signs Egyptian hieratic symbols. Yirku, and especially Yadin, propose instead $5 + 4$ (that is, numeral 9).²² After the discovery of the hieratic numerals on the Arad ostraca however, Aharoni proved that such numerals were indeed in use in Israel and Judah.²³ The numerals on ostrakon No. 63 are usually interpreted as 17, but this too is uncertain.

"Year 15" and "Year 17 [?]" obviously mean that the ostraca must be attributed to a regnal year of a king who reigned at least 15 or 17 years, but archaeological and epigraphic reasons preclude a date before the dynasty of Jehu. Albright and others have dated the ostraca to Jeroboam II (784-748); on historical grounds, Mazar prefers Jehoahaz (814-800), while Yadin, following his interpretation of the numeral, prefers Menahem (747-734) who reigned only ten years. Aharoni has suggested that the two groups of ostraca bearing different formulae be attributed to two kings of Jehu's dynasty: to Jehoash, who reigned 16 years, and to Jeroboam, his son and successor, who reigned 36 years.

The significance of the ostraca is that they constitute the main epigraphic material thus far found in the northern kingdom of Israel. Among the numerous personal names, two theophorous varieties are of special interest: 1) Gaddiyau, Shemaryau, etc. testify to the use in Israel of the abbreviated *-yw* as against the full form *-yhw* in Judah; 2) Abi-ba'al, Ba'al-zemer, etc. seem to be names still surviving from those using the component Ba'al, widespread in Israel at an early period. Something about the northern Hebrew dialect can be learned from the words *št* and *yn* as opposed to the Judean *šnh* and *yyn*.

The ostraca are particularly interesting as administrative documents telling how taxes were collected in Israel. The place-names from which the goods were sent define the regional organization and agricultural settlements in the central hill-country of Ephraim, which was within the territory of Manasseh during the Israelite Monarchy. The district names are known from the biblical genealogy of the clans of Manasseh: Abi'ezer, Hoggah, No'ah, Shechem, Shemida', etc. But the Bible does not mention the place-names within these districts, such as Elmattan, Geba', Hašeroth, Yašit, Asheroth, Qošoh, Hattel, etc., some of which can be identified with modern villages near Samaria.

2. THE ARAD LETTERS

Administrative documents of another and more interesting kind were discovered by Aharoni during the years 1962-1964 in Arad,²⁴ in an arid region where excavations disclosed the remains of a fortress of the monarchic period, which existed, with various changes, until the end of the kingdom of Judah. It seems to have been a supply station established by the central government to provide travellers on official business with wine, oil, and flour. When necessary, the fortress also provided fighting men. The letters are addressed to Eliashib son of Ashyahu, who was in charge of the stores in the royal fortress, and contain instructions or requests about provisions. Three (!) seals bearing Eliashib's name, found in one of the rooms of the fortress, testify to the importance of his position. The letters, the administrative records of his transactions, were kept in his archives, where a group of 17 was found, nine of them more or less complete. They are attributed to Stratum VI, the end of the Monarchy.

The letters are in terse and factual language and generally begin: "To Eliashib . . ." In Letter 1 Eliashib is ordered by his commander to furnish a measure of wine to the *Kittiyim* (probably Greek mercenaries serving in the Judean army), as well as flour for making bread, and to record the day the order was carried out.

A letter from one of his subordinates asks Eliashib to supply some goods to Shemaryahu and to the Kerosite (one of the Nethinim, a class of temple servitors [?]):

To my lord Eliashib, may Yahweh ask for your peace. And now give to Shemaryahu . . . (?) . . . and to the Kerosite give . . . (?) . . . And regarding the matter about which you commanded me, all is well. He is staying in the house of Yahweh. (Letter 18).

In another letter, Eliashib is asked to send to Beersheba two asses' loads of a particular commodity.

Another letter (No. 17) is addressed not to Eliashib but to a certain Nahum, who is requested to go to Eliashib's house, get from him a measure of oil, and send it immediately, sealed with his seal. On the reverse of the sherd, written in a different hand, is a receipt for the delivery of oil on the 24th of the month by Nahum to the *Kitti* (who was apparently his messenger).

One of the most interesting of the ostraca is a politico-military document, inscribed on both sides, with the obverse effaced so that the addressee is unknown, although he was probably the commander of the fortress. The letter urgently orders that a quota of men in Arad and in another place (Qinah?) be called up and sent to Ramath-Negeb:

From Arad 50 [?] and from Qin[ah . . .] . . . and you shall send them [to] Ramath Neg[eb by] the hand of Malkiyahu son of Qerab'ur and he

shall hand them over to Elisha son of Yirmiyahu in Ramath-Negeb, lest anything should happen to the town. And the word of the king is upon you, on your very lives. Behold, I have sent to warn you today: [get] the men to Elisha, lest Edom should come there. (Letter 24).

This rare document reflects the conditions in the border region where Arad and Ramath-Negeb (Horvat 'Uzza?) were situated and where wars with Edom were fairly frequent. Aharoni thinks that the letter refers to an Edomite attack during the reign of Jehoiakim in 600–598 B.C.E. on the eve of Nebuchadnezzar's first campaign; it may, however, possibly be attributed to Nebuchadnezzar's second campaign, which led to the fall of the kingdom of Judah.

The letters are not signed and are written in a good formal cursive hand by trained people. Two main scripts can be distinguished, one that of the Lachish Letters (Stratum VI = c. 595 B.C.E.), the other less developed (Strata VIII–VII = c. 701–609 B.C.E.). According to Aharoni, examples of an even earlier script were found in Strata XI–X, dated from 920–800 B.C.E. Such an early date as the 10th century B.C.E. should be treated cautiously.

From the orthographic point of view, the internal *matres lectionis* should be noted: 'wryhw, 'yr, especially in the *hif'il*: lh'yd, hbqydm (hfqydm). All the numerals in the letters and lists are hieratic symbols, which were apparently widely used in Israel and Judah.

A total of about one hundred ostraca have been found at Arad: letters, lists, dockets, and sherds bearing a single word, either Pashhur or Meremoth, priestly names mentioned in the Bible. Although some are effaced and illegible, this group of well-preserved Hebrew letters is so significant that it must be considered one of the most important discoveries in Hebrew epigraphy.

3. THE LACHISH LETTERS

An important and deservedly famous discovery from the period of the Monarchy are the Lachish Letters,²⁵ 21 ostraca written in ink, including 18 letters (nos. 2–18, 21), a list of names (no. 1), a list of names and numbers (no. 19), and an invoice (no. 20). With three exceptions, all were found in 1935 in the guard-room between the outer and inner city gates, in a burnt layer attributed to the destruction of Lachish by the Babylonians in 589/8 B.C.E. Only six of the ostraca are well enough preserved to be read.

The language resembles that of the book of Kings and the prose chapters of Jeremiah, but uses some words and expressions not in the Bible. The spelling is generally defective, but there are some instances of internal *matres lectionis* ('yš, 'yr, m'wmh). The cursive script reaches the peak of its development in most of the ostraca, and is considered the last stage of the old Hebrew script. After

the fall of the kingdom of Judah it gradually went out of daily use and was replaced by Aramaic.

The letters were sent by Hoshayahu (his name appears only in Letter III) to his commander, Ya'osh (a short form of 'Yoshiahu), and usually begin with the standard salutation, "May God cause my lord to hear good tidings," and include the submissive phrase, "your servant is a dog," used in the biblical world when addressing a king. It is generally agreed that Ya'osh was the commander of Lachish, where the letters were found, and that Hoshayahu was his subordinate, in charge of one of the outlying forts.

The Lachish Letters allude to a correspondence and contain orders to certain persons whose nature is insufficiently understood. Their main interest, however, lies in references to political and military matters of the time. The frequent illegibility, giving rise to various interpretations, is most regrettable, especially since it is sometimes difficult even to suggest a reasonable interpretation.

In Letter III Hoshayahu writes that he has heard that the military commander Konyahu son of Elnathan went to Egypt and sent some of his men on a mission. He writes that he is forwarding to Ya'osh a letter from Tobyahu, the servant of the king, which came by the hand of the prophet and says "Beware!" All this is reminiscent of an incident in the Bible: the prophet Uriah son of Shemaiah of Kiriath-jearim, a member of Jeremiah's party, fled from Jehoiakim to Egypt, was returned to Jerusalem by Elnathan son of Achbor and his men, and executed (Jer. 26:20–24). Tur-Sinai has suggested that the biblical account and the ostrakon refer to the same event, but there is a chronological difficulty, since the biblical episode occurred during Jehoiakim's reign and Letter III seems to have been written in Zedekiah's time. Since, moreover, the names of the army commanders are not identical, Tur-Sinai's theory has not been generally accepted.

Letter VI is significant in this connection, noting that the writer has received the letter of the king and those of the princes, and "behold the words of the . . . are not good, [but liable] to weaken hands" and continues, "and now, my lord, will you not write to them [and say, why] do you do this to . . . yahu?" Tur-Sinai completes the first lacuna to read h[nh], "the prophet," and the second b[r]yhw, "to Uriahu," and compares it with the words about Jeremiah: "then the princes said to the king, 'Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city and the hands of all the people'" (Jer. 38:4). Albright, Ginzberg, and others, on the other hand, complete the first lacuna as h[srym], "the princes," and the second as wby[r]šlm, "and in Jerusalem," and reject the identification with the prophet Uriah. Examination of the original photographs shows that both readings are doubtful. Whatever the correct reading, the incidents alluded to in the Lachish Letters surely bear a remarkable resemblance to events described in the Bible, even though both the

time and the participants were different. Both refer to a period of preparation for impending war, a pro-Egyptian political situation (the commander of the army went to Egypt!), and an opposition that weakened the hands of the people.

Those fateful days are echoed in Letter IV, which ends with a dramatic description of war and siege:

May Yahweh cause my lord to hear good tidings this very day. And now, according to all [the instructions] which my lord sent, so has your servant done; I have written on the column in accordance with all [the instructions] my lord sent me. With regard to [the instructions] which my lord sent in the matter of Beth-haraphid, there is no one there. And as for Semakhyahu, Shemayahu took him and sent him up to the city; and [hence] I, thy servant, am not sending thither the witness, but [I shall send him] tomorrow morning. And may [my lord] know that we are watching for the beacons of Lachish, according to all the signs which my lord has given, for we cannot see [the signals of] Azekah.

This letter was obviously written on the eve of the fall of Lachish and Azekah and describes a situation strikingly similar to the one in Jer. 34:7: "When the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah; for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained." These ostraca may be letters received at Lachish (the generally accepted theory) or they may be copies of letters stored in the city gate where they were written (five of the ostraca are part of the same jar). In any case, it is extremely likely that the letters were found at a site identifiable with Lachish.

Besides these three groups, single ostraca have been found at various sites, the most important of which is the letter from Mešad Hashavyahu, near Yavneh-Yam, which was excavated in 1960 by Naveh, who uncovered the remains of a fortress. The name Hashavyahu is incised on one of the sherds found there.²⁶

The ostrakon is a large jar fragment (20 cm.), with 14 lines in ink, written in a fine cursive script, slightly less developed than that of the Lachish Letters. On palaeographic grounds, it can be dated to the second half of the 7th century B.C.E. In content it is quite different from the other ostraca and adds a new social and legal dimension to Hebrew epigraphic sources, with certain military and political implications. The letter reads:

Let my lord the governor hear the word of his servant. As for your servant, your servant was reaping at Ḥašar-asam. And your servant reaped and finished and stored [the grain] as usual. Before Sabbath, when your servant had finished his reaping and stored [the grain] as usual, Hoshayahu son of Shobai came and took the garment of your servant. When I had finished this reaping of mine as usual, he took the garment of your servant. And all my brethren will testify for me, all those who reap with me in

the heat of [the sun], all my brethren will testify for me. Truly I am innocent of [any] guilt. Pray return my garment and I shall deliver [it] in full. The governor should return the garment of your servant. So let him grant to him mercy. Let your servant's garment be [return]ed and do not dismiss him . . .

The letter was probably written at a military fort, whose garrison was provisioned by a corvée imposed on the nearby peasants or tenant farmers. The writer was part of a labor force harvesting at Ḥašar-asam, probably an agricultural estate. The overseer, one Hoshayahu son of Shobai, suspecting that the author of the letter had not fulfilled his work quota, punished him by confiscating his garment. The reaper thereupon appealed to the governor of the fort, apparently a military commander, and complained that his garment had been confiscated even though he had in fact completed the tasks required. He cites his fellow workers as witnesses to his innocence, and finally asks for mercy and repeats his request for his garment. The language is awkward and repetitive, and the professional scribe clearly wrote exactly what the plaintiff dictated.

The Bible forbids confiscation of garments for nonpayment of debts because it forbids mistreating the poor: "If ever you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down, for it is his only covering, it is his mantle for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate" (Ex. 22:26-27; Deut. 24:10-13). Our letter sends forth the outcry of a mistreated man who knew his rights under biblical law.

The discovery of this Hebrew document and of three other small ostraca at Mešad Hashavyahu in northern Philistia implies that it was controlled by Judah in the 7th century, a fact unknown from other sources but according with Josiah's expansionist policies. He seems to have established this fort on the *Via Maris* as an advance post against Egypt, which he later fought at Megiddo.

When this site was excavated, many eastern Greek pottery fragments from the mid-7th century B.C.E. were found suggesting the presence of foreign mercenaries and recalling the *Kittiyim* in the Arad ostraca.

Mention should be made of another ink inscription on a sherd, the Ophel ostrakon, named after the site in Jerusalem where it was found in 1924 by Duncan and Macalister. It contains three partly effaced lines which list proper names along with place-names.²⁷ The script, similar to that of the Lachish Letters, suggests dating to the end of the Monarchy.

Especially important among inscriptions incised on sherds are the two ostraca found on the surface of Tell Qasileh²⁸ before excavation in 1948. Both are in-voices, indicating that Tell Qasileh was a port and a center of transit trade in the time of the kingdom of Israel. Excavations have shown that the town, which was

founded by the Philistines, was probably destroyed during the campaigns of Tiglath-pileser III in Palestine (c. 732 B.C.E.).

The first inscription, incised on a fragment from the base of an Iron Age II bowl, is read by Mazar as: *lmlk 'l[p] šmn w'm'h hyhw*, "(Belonging) to the king. A thousand oil and hundred. Hiyahu."

It is therefore thought to be an invoice for a quantity of oil (the liquid measure is not indicated) sent from the royal stores by an official named Hiyahu (abbreviated form of Ahiyahu). Since oil was probably not imported into the country this must have been a shipment for export.

The second ostrakon reads: *zhh 'pr lbyl hm š=*, "Gold of Ophir, to Beth-Horon, 30 shekels."

"Gold of Ophir" is used in the Bible to indicate gold of excellent quality, since fine gold came from Ophir. Beth-horon is usually considered the twin city (Upper and Lower Beth-horon) on the road leading from the Shephelah into the hill country, known to have been a levitical city, an administrative center in the district of Ephraim and a store-city in Solomon's time.

Mazar also suggests an alternate interpretation: "for the Temple of Horon," a Canaanite deity whose temple may have existed at Tell Qasileh.²⁹

Last to be mentioned is a Samaria ostrakon incised with three lines of elegant cursive writing of the 8th century, beginning with *brk šlm* (Baruch, peace) and ending with *š'm* (barley) and some numerals.³⁰ Although the writing is clear, interpretation is difficult. Some scholars, however, believe that it deals with the distribution of barley.

D. INSCRIPTIONS ON POTTERY VESSELS

Many short inscriptions have been found incised on complete pottery vessels or on fragments of vessels which were complete at the time they were inscribed. They generally consist of a personal name prefixed by the possessive *lamed*, "belonging to," thus indicating ownership of the vessel: "belonging to Eliyahu" (Jerusalem); "belonging to Damla" (Samaria); "belonging to Yehza" (Tel 'Erani); "belonging to yhm" (Khirbet el-Qom); "belonging to Ishmael," "belonging to Yishayahu" (Jerusalem); "belonging to mkebrm" (Hazor); "belonging to Putiyahu" (En-gedi); "belonging to Neriya," "belonging to Amaryahu" (Beersheba); "belonging to Šadoq" (Arad). A fragment of a bowl found at Arad bears the word "Arad" incised several times in mirror script. The word *qdš*, "holy," is incised on a bowl from Hazor and on a pot from Beersheba, implying some special use for these vessels. Two small bowls from Arad bear the incised letters *qš*, probably an abbreviation of *qdš*, "holy."

Two early Aramaic inscriptions found in northern Israel should also be men-

tioned: *lšqy'*, "belonging to the cupbearers," incised on a jar found at En-gev,³¹ and *ltb[h]y'*, "belonging to the cooks," incised on the base of a bowl from Tel Dan,³² implying Aramean rule in this district in the 9th century B.C.E.

An interesting exception is the decanter from the Hebron district (8th-7th centuries), with both the name of the owner and the contents: "Belonging to Yahzeyahu, wine of Khl." ³³ Khl is probably the place after which the wine was named. ³⁴ The inscription *lpqh smdr*, "Belonging to Peqah, s'mādar," on a jar from Hazor may be of a similar nature if s'mādar is thought to be a kind of drink. ³⁵ A jar from Lachish is incised *bt lmlk*, "royal bāt," indicating the royally approved measure of capacity. ³⁶

Of special interest is an inscription written in ink on a jar fragment discovered in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. The first two lines apparently contained names, of which *mkyhw* can be clearly read. In the third line the letters *qn'rš*³⁷ have survived, which should probably be completed [*lqn'rš*. This is a continuous writing of *lqn'h 'rš*, "God-the-creator-of-the-earth," found also in a Phoenician inscription from Karatepe: *b'l šnm w'lqn'rš*, "Baal Shamem and God-the-creator-of-the-earth." This divine appellation occurs in the Bible in a slightly different form (Gen. 14:19). Since it was inscribed on a jar it means perhaps that the vessel was used to bring an offering to the Temple. *

Pritchard uncovered 61 incised jar-handles at Gibeon.³⁸ The inscriptions follow an almost uniform formula: "Gibeon, *gdd* [or *gdr*], Hananyahu Nera." Only one handle is inscribed *gb'n . lgdd/r . hnnnyhw*, "Gibeon belonging to 'gdd (or *gdr*), belonging to Hananyahu." The possessive *lamed* indicates that, with the exception of the place-name Gibeon, all the others are personal names. It is believed that these were wine-jars for commercial use and that the inscriptions record the name of the vineyard where the wine was produced and the name of the owners. These inscriptions are dated to the 6th century B.C.E., perhaps to the period of the Babylonian exile. Gibeon seems to have escaped destruction by the Babylonians when they destroyed Jerusalem.

Another similar inscription on a jar handle should be similarly interpreted: *hmsh š'l*, meaning wine produced in *Ha-mośah*, the biblical form of Mośah, and *Shu'al*, the name of the owner of the vineyard.³⁹ (The name *Mośah* also appears on stamped jar-handles of the Persian period.)

E. SEALS AND SEAL-IMPRESSIONS⁴⁰

Seals and seal-impressions yield important information about administration and government, the onomasticon in use, and religion, as well as linguistic links and customs in common with neighboring peoples.

Of special interest and importance are the royal seal impressions stamped on

jar-handles, commonly called *lamelek* impressions,⁴¹ which have been found at most sites excavated in Judea: Jerusalem, Ramat Raḥel, Tell en-Naṣbeh, Gibeon, Gezer, Beth-shemesh, Tell Zakariyeh (Azekah), Tell el-Judeideh, Lachish, etc. Each stamp has a symbol and an inscription, the symbols representing either a four-winged scarab or a two-winged sun-disk, and the inscription bearing the word *lmk* "Belonging to the king," and one of the four place-names: Hebron, Ziph, Socoh, and *nmšt*, the last still unidentified. More than one thousand such *lamelek* impressions have thus far been found.

There is general agreement that the word *lmk* indicates royal ownership or authority and a number of theories about the significance of the place-names have been advanced: store-cities where food was kept in royal storerooms (Albright); administrative centers where taxes in kind were collected in vessels of a capacity guaranteed by the Crown (Clermont-Ganneau, Albright, Aharoni); key-cities of defensive zones where provisions for the army were stored (Yadin); royal pottery factories where jars of guaranteed capacity were produced (Macalister, Döringer); royal estates marketing their wine or oil in jars stamped with the name of the place where they were produced (Welten, Cross, Lapp). We consider a combination of the last two theories the most likely. Royal estates supplied produce to army garrisons in fortified cities according to their needs: "He made the fortresses strong, and put commanders in them, and stores of food, oil and wine" (II Chron. 11:11). It is in such fortresses scattered throughout Judah that the stamped jar-handles have been found. Such an interpretation also helps to explain the name *nmšt*, which does not appear in the Bible as it would have had it been a district capital or administrative center, but not if it had been a royal estate or farm.

The date of the *lamelek* seals has been controversial because clear stratigraphical data are lacking. It was usual to date them to various periods from the end of the 8th to the end of the 7th centuries B.C.E. and to assume that the four-winged seals preceded the two-winged.

Discussion of this problem concentrated essentially upon the findings at Lachish, since the largest number of *lamelek* impressions (315) were discovered there and were in fairly clear stratigraphical position. The majority were in Stratum III, the remainder in Stratum II. Dating the end of Stratum II to the final destruction of Lachish by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E. is everywhere accepted, but the date of the end of Stratum III has been more heatedly argued. The excavator Starkey and others attributed its destruction to the first conquest of Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C.E., Olga Tufnell and others to the conquest by Sennacherib in 701 B.C.E.

Excavation at Lachish was recently resumed under the direction of D. Ussishkin, who, like Tufnell, concluded that the Stratum III city was destroyed in

701. In its rooms were found complete jars, on which appear *lamelek* impressions, both of scarabs and winged sun-disks, indicating that there was no chronological distinction between these two types of stamps and that both were in use at the end of the 8th century B.C.E., the period of Hezekiah king of Judah. No *lamelek* impressions were found by Ussishkin in Stratum II, which nevertheless does not exclude the possibility that the *lamelek* jars were still used for a brief period in other places during the 7th century.

Ussishkin also discovered 4-handled jars at Lachish, with royal impressions as well as "private" stamps. Two handles of one jar bore the *lmk swkh* impression, the other two *mšlm 'hmlk*, "belonging to Meshullam son of Ahimelek." (Previously found at Lachish were seven single handles all bearing this name.) These jars, and the handle from Ramat Raḥel, which has a *lmk hbm* impression together with *nr' šbn'*, attest that these "private" seals belonged to officials in the royal administration of Judah. Perhaps this can be said about many other "private" impressions on single handles that may have been part of *lamelek* jars, especially about identical impressions discovered at various sites: *nmh mgn* (Lachish, Ramat Raḥel, Gibeon); *šbn šhr* (Lachish, Ramat Raḥel, Tell en-Naṣbeh); *špn 'zryhw* (Lachish, Beth-shemesh); *nmh hšlyhw* (Lachish, Gibeon, Jerusalem), etc. It is also possible to assign some of the "private" impressions to estate owners, whose jars were stamped for marketing purposes.

At three sites (Tell Beit Mirsim, Beth-shemesh, Ramat Raḥel) handles were found with the impression *'lyqm n'r ywkn*, commonly thought to mean "Eliakim steward of Jehoiachin 'king of Judah'", but Eliakim is more likely to have been an attendant for a civilian. Ussishkin attributes these impressions to the 8th-century *lamelek* jars, a view that is unacceptable because Eliakim could not have been the servant of two masters: As attendant for an individual his name could not appear on royal jars, and as an official of king Jehoiachin his name could not appear on 8th-century B.C.E. jars. On *na'ar* stamps, which were unrelated to the king, see below.

Another kind of seal-impression appears on bits of clay used for sealing papyrus documents (*bullae*), which are rare because the clay usually disintegrates when the letter or document is unrolled. Two such *bullae* have been excavated: *lgdlyhw 'šr 'l hbyt*, "belonging to Gedalyahu, who is over the house," from Lachish, and *lg'lyhw bn hmlk*, "belonging to Ge'alyahu, son of the king," from Beth-zur. An important discovery was made at Lachish, where a 6th-century B.C.E. juglet was found which contained 17 *bullae*.⁴² In this instance the *bullae* were preserved after the documents had been unrolled and deposited in an archive. They are stamped with the names of private persons and perhaps of royal officials: "Belonging to Naḥum son of 'Ananyahu," "Belonging to Yirmiyahu son of Šephan-yahu, son of nby," "Belonging to Neryahu (son of) Par'osh," etc. Finds of this

kind are eloquent testimony to the widespread use of papyrus for letters and documents in the time of the Monarchy. A major find of this category was recently published, containing 65 inscribed *bullae* of the Persian period.⁴³

No royal seal or seal-impression has as yet been discovered in this country, but many have been found of royal officials whose titles are known from the Bible, along with the name of the king or simply his designation. None of these officials can be absolutely identified with a biblical personage, although occasionally the identification is probable. Some of these are listed below (provenance unknown, unless indicated):⁴⁴

Belonging to Ashna, servant ('*ebed*) of Aḥaz; Belonging to Ya'zanyahu servant of the king (suggested identification with Jaazaniah son of the Maacathite; Tell en-Naṣbeh); Belonging to Obadyahu servant of the king, Belonging to Shema' servant of the king, Belonging to Shema' servant of Jeroboam (Megiddo); Belonging to Abiyahu servant of Uzziyahu (= Uzziah); Belonging to Shebanyahu servant of Uzziyahu (= Uzziah); Belonging to Elshama' son of the king, Belonging to Ge'alyahu son of the king (*bulla*; Beth-zur); Belonging to Yehoahaz son of the king (Jehoahaz son of Josiah?); Belonging to Gedalyahu, who is over the house (identified with Gedaliah son of Ahikam; *bulla*; Lachish).

"Servant of the king" ('*bd hmlk*) and "who is over the house" ('*sr l hbyt*) were titles of high officials in the royal administration, and are known from biblical and other sources. Opinions differ as to whether the title "son of the king," *bn hmlk*, which also appears in the Bible, refers to the king's son who held some official position, or whether this is the title of a non-royal functionary in the king's service.⁴⁵ Another title usually translated "steward" (*n'r*, literally, "boy") is borne in the Bible not only by royal officials but also by "stewards" or private persons (cf. Boaz's *na'ar*). Two Hebrew seals of such "stewards" who were not royal officials have recently been discovered: "Belonging to Malkiyahu steward of Shafat," "belonging to Benayahu steward of Haggai."⁴⁶ Of outstanding interest is the unique seal inscribed: "[Belonging to] Zecharyahu priest of Dor," which introduces a new class of titlebearers.^{46a}

A recent (1975-76) and unusual discovery in Hebrew epigraphy was made at Kuntillat Ajrud, a remote oasis on the Sinai border. Inscriptions and fragments thereof were found in a ruined building on wall plaster, pottery, and stone vessels. A few fragmentary inscriptions have already been published: "... l'bdyw bn 'dnh brk h' lyhw," "... sm' yw bn 'zr," "... brkt 'tkm," "... hytb yhw." There are also inscriptions in Phoenician script, one mentioning both the Tetragrammaton YHWH and Baal.

The pottery, the script, and the personal names, most of them ending with the theophoric component *-yw*, suggest a date between the mid-9th and the mid-8th

century B.C.E. The site was on the Negeb border of the kingdom of Judah and may have been a cult center on the road to Elath and Ezion-geber.⁴⁷

The great majority of seals carry names of private persons, with or without indicating some family relationship (son of, daughter of, wife of), and a patronymic. Of course, it is quite possible that some of these were officials. The onomastic is extensive and varied and, though it essentially includes names from the Bible, many new ones have been recorded. Most of the names are theophorous, both abbreviated and full forms are extant, and they are almost always prefixed by the possessive *lamed*. A few will serve as examples: Shaphat, Asaph, Yirmiyahu, Uriyahu, Shaul, etc.; Hoshah'yahu son of Shelemyahu, Domleyahu son of Neri-yahu, Haggai son of Shebanyahu, Neḥemyahu son of Mikayahu, Netanyahu son of Buzi, etc. Sometimes *bn* ("son of") is omitted: Naḥum/Elshama', Yo'asah/Zakkur, Shebna/Aḥab, Samak/Aḥimelek, Azaryahu/Hilqiyahu, Haggai/Yiś'al, etc. The new or rare names include: Peseah, 'Aśi, Geryahu, 'ply, Domla', Hila', 'Abiryahu, Kilkelyahu, Sarmelek, Kushi, Yo'ur, Perah, Giddel, Dalah, Ephroah, etc.

Although few seals bearing women's names are known, those that exist testify to women's social standing and to their right and need to use their own seal. The female names are not of the conventional type: "'Immadiyahu daughter of Shebanyahu," "Ne'ehebet daughter of Domleyahu," "Yehoyishma' daughter of Šawaš-šarušur" (an Assyrian patronymic), "Abigail wife of Aśayahu," "Adata wife of Pashhur" (an Egyptian patronymic), "Hami'eden daughter of Aḥimelek," etc.

F. INSCRIPTIONS FROM TRANSJORDANIA

No summary of Hebrew epigraphic sources in Palestine would be complete without a parallel review of the finds from the neighboring countries east of the Jordan, which were culturally and historically linked with Palestine in biblical times. These sources are few at present, because little has been excavated in Transjordan, but the discovery of a number of monumental inscriptions and seals bears witness to the possibility of finding important epigraphical material.

Moab

The most widely known inscription discovered either in Palestine or Transjordan is the Stele of Mesha king of Moab, one of the longest and most important epigraphic documents from the biblical period.⁴⁸

The Mesha Stele, discovered accidentally in 1868 at Dibon, capital of Moab, is of basalt, rounded at the top, 1.15 m. high and 60-68 cm. wide. It contains 34 lines of text, the end of the inscription missing. The text has been reconstructed

from a squeeze copy made by Clermont-Ganneau before the local Beduin broke the stele into fragments.

In this commemorative inscription, Mesha king of Moab recounts his revolt against Israel and the liberation of Moab from Israel, extols his victories and conquests, and boasts of his vast building projects. His version of the wars between Israel and Moab differs from the biblical account. The Mesha Stele is of the greatest interest and value, since it is a contemporary account of the events it describes.

The inscription is written in the first person: "I Mesha son of Chemosh [yat] King of Moab, the Dibonite. My father reigned over Moab for thirty years, and I reigned after my father." He erected a *banah* [high place] for Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, and restored to Moab the land of Medeba which had been conquered by Israel. He goes on to describe the war and the conquest of the plain north of Dibon, including Ataroth and Nebo, which were settled by the Israelites. The date of this war presents a chronological problem: the inscription states that Israel ruled Moab for 40 years during the reign of Omri and half the reign of his son, but Omri's 12 years (I Kings 16:23) and Ahab's 11 (I Kings 16:29) equal only 23. Moreover, according to II Kings 3:5, Mesha revolted not during Ahab's lifetime but after his death. Although scholars have repeatedly attempted to explain away these contradictions, the problem remains unsolved. The date of this stele is generally given as 850 or 830 B.C.E.

The building projects of which Mesha boasts are impressive indeed: "It is I [who] built *qrhh* (place-name or perhaps acropolis), the wall of the forests and the wall of the citadel and I built its gates and I built its towers and I built the king's house." Mesha also saw to the water-supply by building a cistern and ordering the people to make cisterns in their houses because there were none inside the town. Israelite prisoners carried out another unexplained enterprise, *hmkrtt*, at *Qrhh*. Mesha also repaired or rebuilt Aroer, Beth-diblathaim, Beth-baal-meon, Bezer, and Medeba itself, all north of the Arnon River, built highways at the Arnon, and reconstructed a *bēt hāmōt* which had been destroyed.

The language of the Mesha Stele is of the greatest interest. Although it is a Moabite monument, the script is closely related to Hebrew and the language to Hebrew biblical prose and to the literary and historiographic style of the books of the Bible. The role assigned to the national deity, Chemosh, also resembles that of the God of Israel: "Because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries . . . Omri . . . oppressed Moab many years [literally, days], for Chemosh was angry with his land . . . and Chemosh said to me, 'Go, take Nebo from Israel.'" Common only to biblical Hebrew and Moabite are several linguistic features like the shortened future form with conservative *waw* to indicate the past, the relative pronoun *'šr*, and the word *'y* ("ruins").

The word *šr* for year indicates that the dialect was close to Israelite Hebrew. Another characteristic feature of Moabite is the *hif'ta'el* construction of the verb *'lhm*.

The purely consonantal orthography of the Mesha Stele is common to all Canaanite languages of that period, including Hebrew. Internal *matres lectiones* are completely absent, as is, in one case, the final *yod*. Other characteristics include the 3rd-person-masculine singular suffix written with *he*, and the masculine plural ending *nun*. A number of words are unique to Moabite: *'šwh*—"cistern," *qr*—"town," *'hz*—"conquer," *ghrt*—"women," *mkrtt*, etc. It has recently been suggested that the Mesha Stele was written by an Israelite prisoner and that the Moabite language was different, more akin to Arabic (e.g. Nabataean), but the non-Hebraic locution attributed to the Moabite dialect negate such a conclusion. Moabite seals, moreover, show that Moabite everyday speech also had affinities with Hebrew.

A fragment of a basalt stele, found in 1962 at Kerak in Moab, bears three incomplete lines of writing in a script identical to that of the Mesha Stele.⁴⁹ The first line is the most interesting: "... Chemosh-yat king of Moab, the Di[bonite]." Assuming that this inscription can also be attributed to Mesha, the first line can be completed to read "[I am Mesha son of Ch]emosh-yat king of Moab the Di[bonite]," thus giving us the name of Mesha's father, Chemosh-yat, which is damaged in the Mesha stele.

Seals are another important source of Moabite epigraphy,⁵⁰ and are characterized, first, by theophorous names compounded with Chemosh: *kmš'dq*, *kmš'yhy*, *kmš'l*, *kmš'm*, *kmš'tn* and *kmš'm'š*. Some of the seals belonged to holders of high office: "Menasheh son of the King," "*kmš'm* (son of) *kmš'l* the scribe," "Amos the scribe." The script is like that on the Mesha Stele, with changes in certain letter-forms. The seals are dated to the 8th–7th centuries B.C.E., but two of them that bear the name Mesha show Aramaic influence, and should be attributed to the 6th century B.C.E.

Ammon

Second only in importance to the Mesha Stele is an epigraphic find excavated in 1961 on the citadel mound of Amman, ancient Rabbath-ammon.⁵¹ This is the first inscription to enable scholars to study the Ammonite language and script of the 9th century B.C.E.

The broken stone slab (19.5 × 26 cm.) has eight fragmentary lines and is part of a monumental inscription in 9th-century Aramaic lapidary script, only minimally different from the Hebrew script of the contemporary Mesha Stele. Although the writing is fairly legible, interpretation remains elusive, both because of the fragmentary condition of the inscription and our insufficient knowledge

of the Ammonite language. It appears, however, to be as closely related to Hebrew as to Moabite.

The first line of the inscription gives us a clue to its character: [... *wy'mr ly m]lkm bnh lk mb't sbbt* [...]. "[And said to me M]ilkom, go build for yourself precincts around..." The beginning has been restored according to line 14 in the Mesha inscription: "And Chemosh said to me, go take Nebo from Israel." It therefore appears to be a building inscription, in which Milcom, the god of Ammon, orders the king (?), who speaks in the first person, to build precincts (?) around the temple (?) or the citadel (?); cf. I Kings 8:13: "I have built thee an exalted house." Then comes a dire threat of punishment (for violating the sacred area?): "they must surely die, I shall surely extirpate him..." The style is strongly biblical.

Another Ammonite inscription is carved on the base of a statue. Part of the text is unclear and only the name Yerah'ezer can be read with certainty,⁵² but the script, which seems early Aramaic in style, suggests dating to the 8th century.

An unusual discovery made in 1967 at Tell Deir 'Alla in Gilead is an inscription written in ink on wall-plaster. The formal script has pronounced Aramaic features and can be attributed to the 8th century B.C.E. The recently published text may have been written in a Gileadite dialect of the Ammonite language, at present difficult to interpret.⁵³

A major Ammonite inscription engraved on a bronze bottle was discovered at Tel Siran in 1972. It contributes significantly to the study of the Ammonite language, script, and chronology. The translation of the complete text reads:⁵⁴

The works of Amminadab, king of the Ammonites,
the son of Hišsal'el, king of the Ammonites,
the son of Amminadab, king of the Ammonites;
a vineyard and the gardens and the 'thr
and cisterns.
May he exult and rejoice
for many years to come and in years
far off.

The king mentioned in this inscription, Amminadab III (for Amminadab I, see the seals mentioned below), is dated by Cross to c. 600 B.C.E. At this stage the script, of Aramaic origin, shows a number of unusual forms which justify calling it Ammonite.

Of linguistic significance is the poetic formula at the end of the text: *ygl wyšmh/ bywmt rbm wšnt/rhqt*, which is closely paralleled by contemporary biblical literature (Ezek. 12:27).

The group of Ammonite seals thus far discovered is impressive and of great importance for the study of Ammonite culture.⁵⁵ The onomasticon is over-

whelmingly Canaanite. The script is lapidary Aramaic, peculiar for archaisms that lag behind the general Aramaic trend. In the latter seventh and early sixth centuries the script developed more fully.

There is a remarkable group of official seals, first among which is that of "Beyad'el servant of Peda'el." The *pd'l* is identified by Cross with the Ammonite king Puduilu mentioned in the annals of Sennacherib (701 B.C.E.).⁵⁶ Next are the seals of "Adonipelet servant of Amminadab" and "Adoninur servant of Amminadab," the latter known from Assyrian records as an Ammonite king who paid tribute to Ashurbanipal. Such identifications provide a firm base for dating the Ammonite seals. Still another official seal belongs to "Menahehem son of Samaḥ, the servant of the king."

Corresponding to the seals of officials bearing the title 'ebed, "servant," are those of female functionaries with the title "maidservant," ('amāh), 'alyah maidservant of Hananel" and "nmwt maidservant of dbhs." These female names originate in the early Arabic onomasticon, and the title testifies to the high position attained by women in Ammon, perhaps because of the influence of desert tribal customs (Albright). Two more seals found in Transjordan belong to persons bearing the title steward (n'r): "Batash steward of Beraḥ'el" and "Abdā, steward of Eliram." These may have been officials of tribal chiefs or estate owners rather than of the king. Another seal, that of "Sōhēr the standard-bearer," bespeaks such a functionary at the royal court. Of special interest is the seal, "Mannu-ki-Inurta, blessed by Milcom," whose owner has an Assyrian name and is blessed by the Ammonite deity.

Some Ammonite private seals should be mentioned: "Menahehem son of Yenahehem," "Nedab'el son of El'azar," etc.

Edom

Although epigraphic finds from Edom are scarce, two seal-impressions are of great interest. A *bullā* found at Umm el-Biyara in 1965 shows the figure of a sphinx and the inscription "belonging to Qausgabar king of Ed[om]."⁵⁷ This is the only royal seal-impression thus far found in any country here discussed. Qausgabar king of Edom, a contemporary of Manasseh king of Judah, is mentioned in Assyrian records, once during Esarhaddon's reign and again early in Ashurbanipal's (667 B.C.E.).

Discovered at Tell el-Kheleifeh (Ezion-geber?) were several 7th-century jar-handles whose script shows considerable Aramaic influence with the seal-impression "Belonging to *qws'nl* servant of the king," that is, an official of an Edomite king.⁵⁸ The theophorous element *Qaus-* is the Edomite deity. Found at the same site was a seal with the name "*Yatom*" and the figure of a ram.