

# New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and its Region

Collected Papers

Editors:  
David Amit  
Orit Peleg-Barkat  
Guy D. Stiebel

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Israel Antiquities Authority  
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## Collected Papers Volume IV

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# The Mount Zion Inscribed Stone Cup: Preliminary Observations

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In June 2009, in an excavation conducted outside and to the east of Zion Gate on Mount Zion, fragments of a carved limestone cup were discovered within a fill from the late Second Temple period, i.e. from the first century C.E. This fill was situated above a vaulted ceiling of a well-preserved ritual immersion pool (*mikve*) of the same period (see article by Shimon Gibson in this issue).<sup>1</sup> Following cleaning and the identification of a scratched inscription, a preliminary drawing of the inscribed vessel was made by one of the excavators (Gibson). The text appeared to contain unusual letters which could not be deciphered. Several epigraphers were consulted, but apart from the identification of a few consecutive letters written in Jewish square script of the late Second Temple period, the inscription remained enigmatic.

## The Inscribed Stone Vessel

The stone cup is of a type well known from first century C.E. Jewish contexts in Jerusalem and Judaea.<sup>2</sup> The Mount Zion vessel stands 11 cm in height and is preserved with its base and approximately half of its sides up to the rim (10 cm in diameter). The vessel's outer oblique sides were pared vertically from top to bottom, leaving approximately 21 or 22 facets of varying

widths from 1.5 to 2.5 cm. A set of deeply cut cross-grooves (each 2–3 mm wide), appear diagonally across the pared facets of the cup. Each facet, when viewed sideways, with the rim of the vessel on the left, is filled in with either lines of text – written, as we shall see, in a mixture of at least three different scripts – or with a zigzag design (apparently intended to prevent any additions being made to the inscribed text). Ten lines of what was apparently an 11-line inscription have been preserved wholly or in part (3 lines are partial). The remaining 10 or 11 facets of the vessel were apparently filled in with further zigzag markings. The cross-grooves within the facets proved to be a significant impediment to the scribe as he endeavored, at times unsuccessfully, to provide a clear, legible inscription. Moreover, a number of lines in the inscription proved to be no more than inadvertent scratches. These scratches can only be discerned with the aid of special photographic imaging called PTM/RTI imaging, which utilizes 48 angles of direct, reflected and diffused light. The photographic procedures we undertook provided enhanced views of virtually every stroke, groove and scratch on the exterior surface of the vessel. This facilitated our research considerably.

The scripts, known and previously unknown Our analysis has shown that an estimated 100 inscribed letters (or parts of letters) have been preserved, each letter measuring about 0.3 to 0.6 cm in height. The letters derive from two or more previously known alphabets. The clearest of these are four to five words appearing in line 6 of the inscription, which begins in the so called “Hebrew Hieratic” script (a.k.a., Cryptic A script, see Pfann 2001) and finishes with the standard Jewish square script of the period. The first two words of this line may be read as “*Adonai, shavti ...*” and should be translated “Lord, I have returned (or turned, repented).” The remainder of the inscription is written primarily in at least one previously unknown script. Some of the letter forms resemble other known cryptic scripts and signs from the period, namely, those known from some 60 to 100 scrolls from the Qumran caves dating from the last three centuries B.C.E. (Pfann 1997; 2000) One difference between the Qumran and Mount Zion scripts, however, is that spaces or word dividers are lacking in the Mount Zion scripts. This is a serious impediment to the decipherment of the inscription.

## Cryptography<sup>3</sup> and Potential Links with Jewish Mystical Tradition

In lines 4, 7 and 10 of the inscription, four separate sequences or strings of single letters of the alphabet are repeated. The first example, with four instances of the letter *he* (line 4), resembles the *he* derived from the known Hebrew Hieratic (Cryptic A) script. However, in this case the letter has been rotated 90 degrees counter-clockwise. The second and

third examples, with four instances of the letter *yudh* (line 7) and four instances of the letter *waw* (line 7), are similar in form to those letters found in cursive Jewish script. The final example (line 10) resembles the *tsade* found in Paleo-Hebrew and Hebrew Hieratic scripts. These sets of letters that repeat themselves four times are reminiscent of the repeated vowels and consonants found imbedded in Greek magical, Gnostic and Jewish amuletic texts. In Jewish contexts, such letters are usually derived from the various names and titles of God, such as the tetragrammaton, *Elohim, Adonai, 'Elion* and *Tseva'ot*, and this may well be the case with our inscription.

This is also typical of many inscribed amulets and incantation bowls of later fifth to sixth century C.E. date, as well of Cairo Geniza incantation texts of the tenth to twelfth centuries. There, texts containing prayers, incantations, curses, or scripture quotes, along with strings of letters or words representing Divine or angelic names and titles, are written on pottery bowls and on metal or parchment sheets. Also, strings of letters and curious symbols which, from an outsider's standpoint, lack any comprehensible meaning and syntax, are often included.

This stone cup text is similar to the above tradition in some ways since it contains strings of letters representing letters of the Divine Name. It contains a prayer or quote from scripture. It also contains incomprehensible strings of letters that evade being identified as words or sentences since no spacing or punctuation is supplied. It also includes symbols alone and in strings. This might then be the

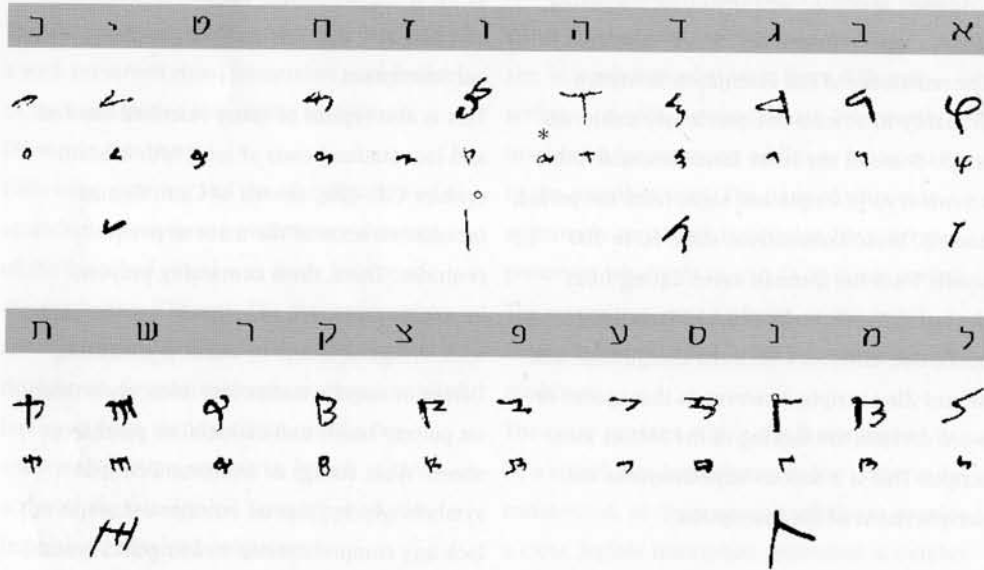
first time that such a mystical text, (or perhaps, an incantation text), has appeared in a Jewish context in first century Jerusalem.

However, it should be noted in caution that the Mount Zion inscription has a number of peculiar features that do not match exactly those known from incantation texts from four centuries later. First, this inscription was written on the exterior of a shaved stone cup and not

on a ceramic bowl, or metal or parchment sheet. Secondly, there are no known incantation texts written with cryptic alphabets or utilizing cryptographic techniques.

One should also take into account that the above mentioned features occur in a number of different text forms that are associated with diverse religious groups. This might indicate that a certain common pool of normal and

### Hebrew Hieratic (Cryptic A) Scripts of the Late Second Temple Period



Line 1. Majuscule Script of the Late Period (ca. second to third quarter of the first century B.C.E). From 4Q324c-g Liturgical Calendar a-e.

Line 2. Majuscule Script of the Late Period (ca. third quarter of the first century B.C.E). From 4Q298 Words of the Sage to all Sons of Dawn.

Line 3. Majuscule Script of the Late Period (ca. first half of the first century CE). Stone cup inscription from Jerusalem's Zion Gate Excavations.

\* = Final letter form = damaged or reconstructed letter

mystical scribal techniques and terminology was shared among a broader range of groups and sources not limited to incantation texts. For example, I would suggest that mystical scribal practice is likely to be seen at Qumran in words with letter sequences such as *he, waw, aleph, he, aleph* (substituted for the *tetragrammaton* in IQS VIII 13) and potentially in mystical or cryptic signs appearing in certain manuscripts, notably in the margins of 1QIsa a and IQS.<sup>4</sup>

The form of cryptic writing reflected in the Mount Zion inscription is not unknown in Jewish circles. It is consistent with a known type of Jewish cryptography in which characters and signs are mixed within a single text. The format of such texts can vary. For example, at Qumran, they can be written with a mixture of letters derived from different alphabets (e.g., 4Q186 *Horoscope*, 4Q259S<sup>6</sup>), or they can be written from left to right (e.g., 4Q186 *Horoscope*), or with select lines of letters written upside down (e.g., 4Q324e *Liturgical Calendar a*).

### Esoteric, Hieratic and Cryptic Scripts

The subject matter of the Qumran texts written in the so-called "cryptic scripts" is diverse and is often disconnected from clear mystical and incantation genres. It includes various calendars (4Q317a-e *Phases of the Moon*; 4Q324d-i *Liturgical Calendar*, etc.), a midrash on the Torah (4Q249 and 4249a), an exhortation to novices (4Q298), a rule book for priestly practice (4Q249 frags.) and a horoscope (4Q186; fig. 1) On the basis of the priestly subject matter that often appears in the Qumran scrolls written using these scripts, we may deduce that such scripts were primarily used by various groups

within the Jewish priesthood of that time. The most common form of the script, identified in 1953, was at the time dubbed "Cryptic A." However, since then, it has been shown to be another evolved form of a simple 22-letter alphabet which can trace its origins from the much older Phoenician script (Pfann 1997; 2000; 2001). Hence the script might preferably be designated "hieratic" or "esoteric" rather than "cryptic." This is similar in many ways to the use of a hieratic script among Egyptian priests, one of which has been named the "Egyptian Hieratic Script." It would follow, therefore, that the script from Qumran might suitably be labeled "Hebrew Hieratic Script."

### The Inscription and Commentary

The following is an interim commentary on the inscription. A complete analysis will be provided in the final publication.

Lines 1-3: illegible



2 Line 4

Line 4 (fig. 4): *he, he, he, he* is the first occurrence of the sequential four strings of letters within this inscription, paralleling the use of such letters for divine names, or for mystical prayers or magic (see also lines 7 and 10, below; Naveh and Shaked 1985: *Amulet 2:5*; *Geniza 1:1-2*; *2/2:8*. Naveh and Shaked 1993: *Amulet 23:16 [hhhhh]*).



3 Line 5

Line 5 (fig. 3): *Adonai*. The word is written in Hebrew Hieratic script. This is the first time that this script has been found outside of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Apparently the word is used to write a name of God: “Adonai (Lord).” Similarly, the better known Paleo-Hebrew script was used in some of the Dead Sea scrolls to write the tetragrammaton “YHWH” (1QP Hab VI 14; X 7; XI 10; 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, etc.), *elohim* “God” (4Q406 ShirShabb<sup>b</sup> 1:2: 3:2; 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, etc.) and *el* “God” (1QH I 26; II 34; VII 5; XV 25; etc.).<sup>5</sup> The word *Adonai* often serves as a circumlocution for the tetragrammaton in the Dead Sea Scrolls, as the Divine Name was considered too holy to be pronounced by unclean lips (cf. Barki Nafshi, Hodayot. etc.), and is not found written in Paleo-Hebrew script. The Mount Zion vessel is apparently the first instance in which the term *Adonai* is written in Hebrew Hieratic (Cryptic A) script in place of the normal Jewish script. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, this script is also used to write the name *yisrael* “Israel” (4Q259S<sup>c</sup> 3:3) and, in the same sentence, *anshei ha’awel* “sons of perdition” (4Q259S<sup>c</sup> 3:4). On the cup, the first letter of *shavti* is clearly a Hebrew Hieratic *shin*. This may be interpreted as a possible scribal error with the scribe having failed to switch to the expected Jewish script after writing a sacred name in Hebrew Hieratic script. In the following

three letters, the scribe produced in Jewish square script first a *beth*, then a *taw*, and finally a *yudh* in straight stick-like strokes, successfully endeavoring to fight the cross grooves produced during the manufacturing of the stone vessel. The first two letters of the next word *lm’n* can only be read with some difficulty, depending upon how one divides the intersecting strokes. There are two possibilities. (1) The first letter could be taken to be a *lamed* with a faint upper stroke. This would then be followed by a final *mem*, instead of a medial *mem*, which is a relatively common phenomenon in other incised or ink-inscribed inscriptions, both on ossuaries and on scrolls of the late Second Temple period.<sup>6</sup> (2) It can also be a partially rotated *alef* followed by a vertical double-inscribed stroke, a *waw* or a *zayin*, with which it intersected. This form of an *alef* is relatively rare, but nevertheless it is still attested among incised inscriptions of the late Second Temple period (Rahmani 1994: CJO 71). In such a case, the left-hand stroke of the upper line turns downwards to intersect with the left downstroke, which makes the case for the separation of the strokes into separate letters less likely.

The *ayin* is clear and well inscribed with a *serif* added to the upper right end of the letter.

The following letter is best taken to be a *waw*

or a medial *nun* since it is a simple down-stroke whose lower end turns slightly to the left. A medial *nun* is at times used at the end of a word although the final *nun* is certainly more common. A *zayin* is less likely since its lower end would normally be expected to turn to the right, and not to the left, which is considered a distinctive feature for distinguishing it from other letters such as a *waw* or *nun*. Given this context, although it remains problematic, *lm’n* would appear to be the most satisfactory reading of this word. This can be vocalized to read either *lema’an* “for the sake of,” or *lema’on* “to the habitation, dwelling (place), apartment.” The scribal execution of the strokes of the following two words was even less successful than the previous word. The first word of *b[ly]t yh* was written in the contemporary cursive Jewish script and the last word written in the dominant hieratic script which appears elsewhere in the inscription. The last three graphemes<sup>7</sup> in the line are thus far indecipherable. They may be either letters of a cryptic alphabet or mystical/magical signs. It is feasible that line 5 might be taken as a line of indecipherable graphemes similar to those that appear in the rest of the inscription. However, one must first reckon with the fact that unlike the rest of the inscription, the writing on line 5 was formed by strings of letters created from known alphabets. It was also comprised of groups of letters and words that are divided by spaces. In light of this, the words of this line are to be interpreted as a real phrase or sentence, which was highlighted or set aside for a specific reason, in stark contrast to the highly indecipherable character of the

rest the inscription. Hence, the words make best sense to the author as a paraphrase of a biblical verse with its words separated by spaces, since most of the line is written in Jewish script unlike the other lines of this text. I suggest that this line contains a paraphrase of a verse from Psalm 26:8: *Adonai ahavti ma’on betecha*, “LORD, I love the dwelling of your house.” In this case the verb is modified from *ahavti* “I loved,” to *shavti* “I have returned, repented.” The following word *ma’an*, if prefixed by a *lamedh*, could be vocalized to read either *lema’an* “for the sake of,” or *lema’on* “to the habitation, dwelling (place), apartment,” although the latter reading is not attested elsewhere without a *waw* between the *ayin* and the *nun*. The following letters *beth* and *taw* are written in the contemporary semi-cursive form of the Jewish script. The space between the two letters is damaged and leaves enough room to allow for the restoration of a *yudh* suggesting the reading *b[ly]t* “house.” This is followed, as with the cursive writing of the rest of the line, by the letters *yh* providing a phrase reading “house of Yah/God.” Like many other first century inscriptions, the context of the cup and its inscription might suggest personal names. If so then one might propose reading into the text names such as *Shabbatai*, *El’azar* or *Batyah*. However to suggest such a list would be tenuous in light of the appearance of *Adonai* in hieratic script as the first name at the head of such a list. Therefore, the phrase can now be cautiously transcribed as *’adonai shavti lema’on b[ey]t yah*, which can be translated “Lord, I have repented for the sake of the house of God,” or “Lord, I have returned to the (holy) habitation



4 Line 7



5 Line 10



6 Lines 11–13

of the house of God.” Many examples of such exclamations or scripture quotes which reflect an action of submission, praise, or a sense of being awestruck, are found interjected into inscriptions such as amulets and texts of a magical or mystical nature, albeit of somewhat later date (E.g. Naveh and Shaked 1985: Amulet 4:1–12). In such cases the content may be a quotation or paraphrase of Scripture which

appears to add empowerment or authority to the exclamation. This would lend support to the latter reading, over against the first. However both remain tentative suggestions for the reading of a very difficult line within this unusual inscription.

Line 7 (fig. 4): *waw, waw, waw, waw*, and *yudh, yudh, yudh*. This sequence of four sets of two letters is a repetition of letters likely drawn

from the Divine Name (see above, line 4). This is particularly true concerning the repetition of *yudh* (four times) and the shortened forms of *yudh* (three times), and *yudh* (twice), which received widespread use as a circumlocution for the Divine Name in Byzantine period amulets and in Babylonian incantation bowls, as well as in Rabbinic literature, *targums* and other manuscripts of the medieval period.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the graphemes in this line have impact craters at the bottom of each stroke, instead of the normal scribal practice where the crater is found at the top of each stroke. This can be explained in two ways: (1) the line was written upside down (Pfann 2001).<sup>9</sup> (2) The uneven line represents letters written as musical notations or stokes written without a ceiling line, with strokes and letters hanging from the line. This might feasibly lead to the formation of each stroke from the bottom of the grapheme instead of the top since there is no fixed ceiling line for the phrase. One might suggest that the graphemes are simply the notes themselves. However, in that case there would be no words to follow the melody.

Line 10 (fig. 5): *tsade, tsade, tsade, tsade* is a line of repeated letters derived from a divine title *tseva'ot* (see above, lines 4 and 7). Written from right to left, the form of each *tsade* appears to deteriorate in sequence (see also: Naveh and Shaked 1985: Amulet 2:4, 5, 14; Naveh and Shaked 1993: Amulet 19:16 (*tsade* 19x); 29:1 [*tsade* 7x]).

The last character in the line is apparently a mystical or magical sign (similar to those visible on later amulets, e.g., Naveh and Shaked 1985: Amulets 8, 14 and Genizah 1, 2, 7 and 8).

This sign also resembles signs from the Dead Sea Scrolls (cf. especially IQS VII and IX) and Masada ostraca (especially Nos. 351–359, Yadin and Naveh 1989: pl. 18).

Lines 11–13 (fig. 6) and probably also lines 14–21 (only the facets along the base are preserved) contain zigzag incisions that were evidently intended to fill in the remaining facets on the cup. These lines may have been added in order to prohibit the insertion of any further texts to the inscription.<sup>10</sup> However, line 11 starts with a series of short angled zigzag lines which appear to grow in length, written from left to right on the line after three letters on the left side of the line. This resembles what is termed as “magic symbols” in at least one later text written on an ostrakon from *Horvat Rimmon*.<sup>11</sup> Continuous erect (equilinear) zigzag lines similar to those of lines 12 and 13 have also been incorporated within the text of an amulet of the fifth–sixth centuries C.E.<sup>12</sup>

### Observations and Conclusions

The contents of the text prove to contain elements which would normally be understood to be connected with diverse traditions. On the one hand, the stone cup<sup>13</sup> and the use of Hebrew Hieratic script reflect practices which are commonly associated with priestly circles of the late Second Temple period. On the other hand, the cup and its inscription contain another set of characteristics which are only seen in Jewish circles after the destruction of the Temple. These characteristics are reflected in Jewish gnostic, mystical and incantation literature continuing up to the medieval period. That priestly circles might

be connected with such practices as early as the Second Temple period should not be surprising. Indeed, this cup and inscription could be a potential watershed for the research of such priestly practices in this period and might serve as a potential backdrop for later mystical and incantation texts. However, the actual content and literary form of the rest of the Mount Zion inscription still remains largely hidden in the mysterious script in which the rest of the text was written. The fact that the Mount Zion inscription

was written in a mixture of scripts without word dividers, complicates its decipherment considerably. Thus far, a few letter clusters and a single phrase written in the Hebrew Hieratic and Jewish square scripts have proven to be a tantalizing entry point for the decipherment of the inscription. Of course, it should be expected that the scribe mixed these scripts intentionally in order to make the process of decipherment difficult. The scribe has thus far succeeded in his task, but not entirely, and hopefully not for long.

#### Footnotes

- 1 The excavations were conducted by Shimon Gibson and James Tabor on behalf of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I am grateful to them for entrusting me with the publication of this inscribed stone vessel.
- 2 See references in previous article by Gibson.
- 3 Cryptography, i.e., scribal techniques which intend to hide the meaning of a text, and "cryptic" scripts should not be seen as one and the same phenomenon, and are treated separately here. The term "cryptic script" has been applied since the 1950s to three scripts found in manuscripts from Qumran. However, these scripts are not cryptographic in character but are genuine alphabetic, esoteric scripts, apparently used by priestly groups (hence the more appropriate designation "Hebrew hieratic script"). See Pfann 2001: 123–135; Kahn 1996.
- 4 Note especially the signs in the margins of 1QS V 1, VII bot. marg., IX 3; 1QIsa a XXII 10 (Isa 28: 9). Cf. E. Tov's catalogue of signs in Tov 2002: 336–339.
- 5 For a complete list, see Tov 2002: 347–349.
- 6 For a final *mem* used in medial position, cf. Rahmani 1994: CJO 67, 559, 560 and 706; for a medial *mem* used in final position, cf. CJO 23, 66, 73 and 694. F.M. Cross notes regarding the Copper Scroll (3Q15): "the scribe of 3Q15 does not distinguish between medial and final *mem*. This practice is not usual but is by no means uncommon among the late semiformal scripts." (Cross 1962: 220).

- 7 The term "grapheme" is used to indicate a coherent set of strokes which may indicate any sign including a letter, a numeral or a sign of magical or other significance.
- 8 Naveh and Shaked 1985: Bowl 2:6, 9; 9:8 (yyyy 3x), 11 (yyyy 3x); Geniza 3, 4, 7, 8; Naveh and Shaked 1993: Amulet 19:30 (yyyyyyy); 24:6, 16 (both yyyy); 27:17 (yyyy); 28:15, 24, 33 (each yyyy); 29:2 (yyyyyyy); 30:4 (yyyy). In most cases where yyyy is found, it is a substitution for the tetragrammaton within a biblical quote. In still other cases *yudh* is presented as an utterance which can apparently be pronounced as a vowel (where *y* is sometimes written as 'y) or as a consonant (where *yh* is substituted for *y*).
- 9 See 4Q324 *Liturgical Calendar* in which the feast of Pentecost/Shavuot is written upside down, in contrast with the rest of the feasts which are written upright.
- 10 As is also a practice found in Greek magical papyri where a line of X's serves the same purpose.
- 11 Cf. IAA, No. 80.800. Naveh and Shaked 1985: Amulet 10:9, two short sets of zigzags termed as magic symbols by Naveh.
- 12 Cf. Naveh and Shaked 1985: Amulet 8 in which there are two and a half lines of zigzags following some magic signs between lines 7 and 8.
- 13 On the ritual use of stone cups, see the article by Gibson, above.

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