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LaMar C. Berrett

# The So-Called Lehi Cave

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## Summary:

A cave southwest of Jerusalem caught the attention of several Latter-day Saint observers in the early 1960s. Graffiti in the cave seemed to portray themes or scenes related to the Book of Mormon, and some thought that the cave might have been the place described in the Book of Mormon as "the cavity of rock." LaMar Berrett points out problems that weaken the likelihood that this is the case. Two scholarly articles on the cave are included.

Paper  
Book of Mormon, Archaeology

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LaMar C. Berrett (Ed.D., Brigham Young University) recently passed away. He was Emeritus Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University.

## THE SO-CALLED LEHI CAVE

LaMar C. Berrett

About twenty miles south-west of Jerusalem and ten miles west-north-west of Hebron, the government of Israel constructed a security road in 1961 to protect the border between Jordan and Israel. During the course of construction an ancient burial cave was uncovered on the eastern slope of Khirbet Beit Lei. The Israel Department of Antiquities excavated the cave during the month of June, 1961, under the direction of Jospheh Naveh, Professor of Archaeology at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. They named the cave the "Jerusalem Cave."

The burial cave was hewn in chalky soft limestone, and contained three rooms: a rectangular ante-chamber measuring 6'-7" x 9'-8" and two burial chambers measuring about 7' x 9' each. Three benches were cut into the rock around three sides of each chamber, and in the southern chamber, three skeletons were found in extended position, one on each bench. The western chamber contained five skeletons. All eight skeletons were undisturbed. The entrance to the cave had been blocked by large stones. A ring was found on one body, an earring of bronze and a plaque of the same material were also found with the bodies. No earthenware vessels or fragments of pottery were found inside the cave.

### Graffiti Found in the Cave

Graffiti made by a crude stylus on the walls of the ante-chamber were very difficult to distinguish and decipher, but have proven to be of interest to archaeologists:

Human Figures: Portrayed on the wall were three human figures. Dr. Naveh concluded that the three figures represent (1) a man holding a kind of a lyre, (2) a man raising the palms of his hands as though in prayer and (3) a man wearing some kind of headgear. The man with the lyre is approximately thirteen inches high, and the man with the raised palms sixteen inches high. The third figure was carved very deeply and emphasizes the man's dress and headgear. It is seven-and-a-half inches high.

Ships: On the southern wall of the ante-chamber were two ships represented in a very crude fashion. The two together measure approximately ten inches high and eighteen inches wide.

Inscriptions: There were several inscriptions in old Hebrew script on the walls of the ante-chamber. One of the inscriptions seemed to read: "Cursed be he who will rob the chamber." The three main inscriptions were interpreted, with some reservations, as follows:

"The mountains of Judah--  
Yahveh (is) the God of the whole earth;  
the mountains of Judah belong to  
him, to the God of Jerusalem."

"The (Mount of) Moriah Thou has favoured,  
the dwelling of Yah, Yahveh"

"(Ya)hveh deliver (us)!"

Attempts to date the cave and its inscriptions have proved interesting. Paleography, the study of the form of letters, was of auxiliary value in drawing chronological conclusions concerning these inscriptions. The form of the letters varied greatly. "In view of the nature of the graffiti," says Naveh, "we assume that all the inscriptions and drawings belong to a short period of time, and they were incised by a number of persons . . ." <sup>1</sup> He concludes that the form of the burial cave and the script are of the pre-exilic period, or prior to 587 B.C.

Naveh readily admits that archaeological and palaeographical analysis fail to provide a definite date, and therefore the only remaining way to fix a date is to find some historical hint in the content of the main inscriptions. He then cautions as follows: "To be sure, such reasoning will be hypothetical only, especially as the reading of the inscriptions remain problematic and that of one inscription is only tentative." <sup>2</sup> Naveh preferred, on palaeographic grounds, to relate the period when the Assyrian ruler, Sennacherib, conquered forty-six towns in Judah and kept Hezekiah besieged in Jerusalem. In this historical setting, Naveh draws a possible conclusion:

It may be that the people who happened to come to this cave and write the various inscriptions did not do so in the course of a regular visit to their family tomb, but perhaps during the burial of one of their members who was killed by the enemy; or perhaps in an hour of danger, when the armies of the enemy passed this way, they found refuge in the family burial cave until the danger was over. <sup>3</sup>

Naveh proposes "to relate the inscriptions to the reign of Hezekiah (Hezekiah came to the throne about 715 B.C.)." <sup>4</sup>

Seven years later, in 1970, Frank Moore Cross, Jr., professor at Harvard University, proposed a 600 B.C. date for the inscriptions. Of the inscriptions, Cross said:

[They] are not ordinary tomb inscriptions. Indeed their content is such that I believe we can assert positively that they are not funerary inscriptions and have no reference to the dead. Moreover, the drawings in the cave, human figures and ships, and what we can best label as "doodling" are inappropriate tomb decorations and hardly come from the hand of mourners or near kin of the deceased. . . . We are inclined, therefore, to attribute the inscriptions and sketches to chance visitors, or to refugees or travelers who took shelter in the cave. <sup>5</sup>

Cross goes on to speculate saying:

It is very difficult to avoid the speculation that inscription A is the citation of a lost prophecy, and that it and its

companion inscriptions were written by a refugee fleeing the Chaldeans who conquered Judah and destroyed the holy city in 587 B.C. Most documents, especially manuscripts and papyri, found in Palestinian caves were left behind by men in such circumstances. The same may be true of these graffiti. Perhaps such speculations are built on too flimsy a foundation of facts; at all events we should suppress the temptation to suggest that the oracle and the petitions may have been the work of a prophet or his amanuensis fleeing Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>

#### Mormon Interest in the Burial Cave at Khirbet Beit Lei

Naveh, the original excavator and learned scholar, would not even attempt to interpret the meaning of the figures on the wall. Cross said we should suppress the temptation to suggest that the oracle and the petitions may have been the work of a prophet or his amanuensis fleeing Jerusalem. But in spite of Cross' warning, some Mormons have concluded that the "prophet or his amanuensis fleeing Jerusalem" were, in fact, Nephi and his brothers fleeing from Jerusalem and the servants of Laban. The Book of Mormon account says of these sons of Lehi, that they hid themselves "in the cavity of the rock."<sup>7</sup> The place name of Lehi; Cross' dating, 600 B.C.; a plea for deliverance and redemption of Jerusalem; prophetic statements in the first person; pictures of ships on the walls, etc. must have more than a passing interest for Latter-day Saints including myself, who in 1973 devoted two pages of my book Discovering the World of the Bible, to summarize the research that had been done on the "Jerusalem Cave."<sup>8</sup> I also visited the home of Joseph Naveh and became the first Mormon to visit the cave. On one later visit I was introduced to Mahmud Ali Hassan Giawi, an Arab who, according to an interpreter, said an ancient prophet named "Lei" judged his people in that locality. Local tradition telling of a prophet named Lehi, gave additional credence to the hope that the cave was the Book of Mormon "cavity of the rock." During the spring of 1975, I spent a full day interviewing other elderly Arab men of nearby villages concerning a prophet named "Lei," and found one man, Nimer Suleiman Bashir, who corroborated the story of Mr. Giawi.

With the evidence of this "first hand research," I left Israel with the determination to do further research that I hoped would be more conclusive. However, as more and more "homework" was done, more and more problems arose.

#### Problems that Need to be Resolved

The following are a few of the problems that dictate extreme caution if one is to try to connect the "Jerusalem Cave" with the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi.

##### Name

The scriptural place named "Lehi" (Judges 15;9, 14, 19), meaning "jaw bone" in Hebrew, seems to refer to a district in the hill country

of Judah somewhere near the borders of the Philistines. When Samson killed 1000 men with the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:17), he named an area "Ramath-lehi" meaning the "heights of lehi," "lifting up of the jawbone" or "casting away of the jawbone." In modern times, Conder and Kitchener<sup>9</sup> listed a particular village named "Beit Leyi" as being near the area of Beit Jibrin. This is probably the site listed on modern Israeli maps as "H Bet Loya." The same site is also spelled "Lei" and "Layy" in other sources. The problem, however, is that in the absence of historical research and an archaeological dig, the location of the Biblical site is still unknown.

When Sennacherib reports his campaign against Palestine in 721 B.C., he does not mention Lehi as one of the cities destroyed. Nor does Micah, who lived in the area. Micah did mention the cities around Beit Leyi, such as Lakish, Gath, Mareshah, Achzib and Addullam, as he laments their destruction (Micah 1). Was Lehi a village, district or area?

Even if the location of the Biblical Lehi were known, Lehi lived at least five hundred years after Samson.

#### Route of Travel

When Lehi and his family left Jerusalem, the record says they traveled in the wilderness "in the borders near the Red Sea." Later, the brothers returned to Jerusalem from the Red Sea area, got the brass plates of Laban and fled into the wilderness back to the Red Sea area. Did they go south-west out of Jerusalem to the "Jerusalem Cave" area, or did they take a more direct route directly south?

Since the area of the "Jerusalem Cave" south-west of Jerusalem was the most densely populated area south of Jerusalem in 600 A.D., it is doubtful that the brothers fleeing from Laban would have traveled in that direction. By traveling south or south-east out of Jerusalem, the brothers could have found plenty of caves to hide in, less people to hide from, and a more direct route to their parents on the Red Sea.<sup>10</sup> That route would probably have been the original route Lehi took on his way to the Red Sea.

In a revelation given in the Kirtland Temple on the day of its dedication, Frederick G. Williams learned that Lehi traveled nearly south-south-east from Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

#### Dating

The shallow accumulation of debris on the site and the modern pottery, indicates that the village is not as ancient as some believe. Indeed, the design of the tomb dates to the second century B.C. Even if the graffiti could be firmly dated, this does not necessarily have anything to do with the date the cave was made or the pictures drawn. There may be evidence that the figures on the walls were of a later date. Naveh believed that the figures were written by a number of persons, and at different times. The dating problem is still not solved.

### Human Figures, Ships and Inscriptions

The graffiti on the walls of the "Jerusalem Cave" have been the most convincing evidence to those who want to believe there is a connection between the Book of Mormon narrative and the cave. "Believers" feel there is a certain "uniqueness" to the graffiti that lends support to the Book of Mormon account. But are they really unique?

As other tomb inscriptions both near and far from the "Jerusalem Cave" are examined, it may be concluded that the figures, ships and message of the inscriptions are not unique nor all of the same early dates. Bliss dates most of the burial caves in the Beit Jibrin area (also the "Jerusalem Cave" area) to the Medieval period--to the Christian Crusaders. There is ample evidence that Christians were in the area of the "Jerusalem Cave" for centuries, and according to Goodenough, they made many additions and changes in former Greek tombs.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that there were influences of Christianity in the graffiti of the "Jerusalem Cave." And if not direct Christian influences, then influences of many burial customs of the world.

#### Figure with the Lyre

In speaking of the art of the Roman Christian catacombs, Jack Finegan said: ". . . early Christian art did not hesitate to borrow from representations already familiar in pagan art . . . Just as Clement of Alexandria around 200 A.D. held that a Christian should not employ for his signet ring any idolatrous, warlike or licentious symbol, but rather such seals as a dove, fish, a ship, a lyre [*italics provided*] or an anchor, so too the artists of the catacombs freely employed such figures in a decorative way and even gave some of them deeper Christian meaning."<sup>13</sup> There is a picture of a maiden plucking a small harp in Tomb II, Room F (numbering of Peters and Theirsch) at Beit Jibrin near the "Jerusalem Cave." The expanded leg muscles on the legs of the two figures in the "Jerusalem Cave" are not unique. Military saint figures in the Beit Shearim tombs in the Galilee area have the same. Goodenough interprets these to be symbolic representations of a struggle of the person's faith.<sup>14</sup>

#### Figure with Outstretched Arms

Arms uplifted or outstretched in prayer is a very familiar Hellenistic art form, and these figures recur with great frequency in the Christian art of the catacombs. Jack Finegan indicates that since such figures occasionally are shown amidst the garden of paradise, and have the names of the departed written nearby, it is clear that they might also be regarded as symbolic representations of the deceased who offer prayer to God in the blessedness of Heaven.

The most frequently used symbol in Christianity is the cross . . . "But," says Bliss, "in two caves (one at Tel Mareshah near the "Jerusalem Cave," and the other, the famous 'Arak el-Ma at Beit Jibrin) we find figures with outstretched arms, which may be rude attempts at crucifixes." In another report, Bliss suggests that the persons are "in an ancient attitude of prayer."<sup>15</sup>

### Figure with Headgear

Just north of Jerusalem, immediately west of the so-called "Tomb of the Kings," was found a small rock-cut tomb which seemed to Goodenough to belong with the tombs of Mareshah and Beit Jibrin near Beit Lei. It was designed like those in the Shephelah, and dated to the same period of time, 200 B.C. Three figures are inscribed in the wall of the tomb. "At the right stands a man in a flowing red robe, with right knee slightly raised and his left arm uplifted." This is a feature of the "Jerusalem Cave" headgear figure also. All three figures in this cave are crowned, "and hence represent human beings engaged in same sort of ritual, . . ."16

Bliss found an interesting figure on a jamb of the entrance to a rock-hewn burial cave located near Khirbet Beit Lei.<sup>17</sup> His published drawing of the graffito shows many similarities to the figure with the headgear in the "Jerusalem Cave." Both figures are cut deeply, both have a certain squareness to the lines of the head and body, both have horizontal lines for the eyes and mouth, and both lack noses. It is also of interest that this figure was found on the lower part of the door jamb, just like the praying figure in the "Jerusalem Cave." This particular figure is certainly not unique to the "Jerusalem Cave."

### Ships

Crudely drawn ships have been common funerary symbols throughout the centuries. The Egyptians had their tombs decorated with ships taking the deceased to the other world. They even buried model and real ships with the dead. So did the Vikings. The custom of associating ships with burials is at least 5,000 years old.

During the period of early Christianity, ships were connected with burial customs. One of the most common symbols in the catacombs of Rome is the ship in full sail, symbolizing the same concept as the Egyptians--the voyage of the soul to "another and better world."<sup>18</sup>

Joseph Naveh indicated that perhaps the ships in the "Jerusalem Cave" were connected with religious beliefs, and then he indicates in his footnote that there are other representations of ships and connections with burials in Jerusalem and Beit Shearim.

Goodenough says that Fig. 67 at Beit Shearim "shows two boats, one above the other, with elaborate rigging." Avi-Yonah points out the resemblance of the first of these to the Egyptian boats.<sup>19</sup> A shield of David is scratched in front of the upper boat. As to their purpose, Goodenough says they "are in the catacomb presumably as symbolic boats rather than as pictures of someone's means of travel or profit."<sup>20</sup>

At Mareshah, two and a half miles from the "Jerusalem Cave," is a graffito representing a sailing vessel with a square sail. It was found on a block of limestone in 1900. Similar to other burial cave graffiti, the ship is crudely drawn. Brinley concludes that the ship was drawn

between 200 B.C. - 200 A.D., and it is "possibly a portrait of his own vessel done by a sailor to amuse a group of inland children . . ."21

Why was Naveh surprised to see ships on the wall when the nearby Gaza and Ashkelon had important seaports as early as 1200 B.C.; and in the twelfth century B.C., Syria and Palestine were flooded by peoples from the coasts and islands of the Northern Mediterranean? In addition to this, the neighboring Philistines were sea peoples. And the Phoenicians and Egyptians had both been in the area leaving their influence.<sup>22</sup>

If Nephi did visit the "Jerusalem Cave," and knew of plans for building a ship, why did he make two ships on the wall instead of one? Did Nephi or his brothers even know they were going to sail in a ship at the time they were hiding in the cavity of the rock? Or did they learn this eight years later? Lehi and his family spent eight years in the wilderness before the Lord called Nephi into the mountain and said, "Thou shalt construct a ship, after the manner which I shall show thee. . . " [italics added] (1 Nephi 17:8).

### Inscriptions

Incomplete and blurred inscriptions cause questions to be raised concerning the translations that have been suggested. But even if the translations of Naveh and Cross were correct, the message of the inscriptions is certainly not unique to the "Jerusalem Cave." Could they then, have been a plea of Nephi and his brethren as they were fleeing from Laban?

Peoples of the world have lived in a wild, fierce age of lust, rapine, and conquest. Conquerors have left trails of fear, and Christians and heathens alike have longed for the salvation that their gods provided. Symbols and inscriptions connected with burial tombs have often suggested eschatological hope and immortality after death.<sup>23</sup> Many catacomb paintings portray Noah and the ark symbolizing the same plea: "Save us, O' Lord." How then can Cross say the inscriptions in the "Jerusalem Cave" are inappropriate tomb writings?

The plea for salvation, redemption from affliction and delivery from the enemy is common in the Bible.<sup>24</sup> The messages scrawled on the walls of the "Jerusalem Cave" could just as well be a plea for "Salvation in Heaven," as a plea to escape the threat of Nebuchadnezzar.

### Conclusion

Many more questions could be asked about the "Jerusalem Cave." For example, wouldn't it have been more logical for Nephi to have used one of the hundreds of natural caves for shelter, rather than a burial cave full of skeletons? Why were the bones of the eight people in the "Jerusalem Cave" found undisturbed, if people hid in the cave for any length of time? Did they sit on the benches? Would they become "tainted," as they sat among the dead men's bones? These, and many other questions, make any connection between this burial cave and the Book of Mormon highly unlikely.

## Endnotes

1. Joseph Naveh, "Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave." Israel Exploration Journal, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 89. Jerusalem, 1963.
2. Ibid.
3. Naveh, p. 92.
4. Ibid.
5. Frank Moore Cross, Jr. "The Cave Inscriptions From Khirbet Beit Lei." Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century: Essays in Honor of Nelson Glueck. James A. Sanders, Ed. pp. 299-304; Edited by City, N.Y., 1970.
6. Cross, p. 304.
7. I Nephi 3:27.
8. LaMar C. Berrett, Discovering the World of the Bible, pp. 395-396. Brigham Young University Press: Provo, Utah, 1973.
9. Capt. C.R. Conder, R.E., and Capt. H.H. Kitchener, R.F., The Survey of Western Palestine, p. 274. Committee of the Exploration Fund, London, 1883. Republished by Kedem Publishing, Jerusalem, 1970.
10. Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions, p. 230, McGraw Hill: New York, 1961.
11. Nancy Clement Williams. After 100 Years, pp. 101-102, Zion's Printing and Publishing Co., "Independence, 1951.
12. Erwin R. Goodenough. Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period, Vol. 1, p. 72, Pantheon Books: N.Y., 1953.
13. Jack Finegan. Light from the Ancient Past, p. 382, Princeton University Press: N.J., 1946.
14. Goodenough, p. 100.
15. Frederick Jones Bliss, Ph.D. and Stewart Macalister, M.A., F.S.A., Excavations in Palestine During the Years 1898-1900, pp. 188-270. Palestine Exploration Fund: London, 1902. See also Macalister's description in Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement for 1901, p. 226-230.
16. Goodenough, p. 77.
17. Bliss, p. 242.
18. Wm. H. Davenport Adams. Famous Caves and Catacombs, p. 123, Books for Libraries Press: N.Y., 1972 (orig. 1886).

19. Goodenough, p. 97.
20. Ibid.
21. H.H. Brindley, M.A. "A Graffito of a Ship at Beit Jibrin," Palestine Exploration Fund-Quarterly Statement, pp. 76-78, London: 1919.
22. Wm. F. Albright. The Amarna Letters From Palestine, Cambridge University Press: Boston, 1966 (See Goodenough, p. 72.)
23. Goodenough, pp. 264-267.
24. Naveh, p. 87.



Map of Judah

The burial cave is located on the western slope of the Judean range in an area known as the "Shephelah." It is ten miles west-north-west of Hebron, five miles directly east of Tel Lachish, two and a half miles south-east of Tel Maresha, three and a half miles south-east of Bet Guvrin and two and a half miles north-north-east of the modern Israeli moshav, Amazia. The cattle from Amazia graze on the hills of Khirbet Beit Lei.

# Old Hebrew Inscriptions

## in a Burial Cave

J. NAVEH

Department of Antiquities

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

AN ancient burial cave was uncovered in 1961 in the course of road construction, on the eastern slope of the hill of Kh. Beit Lei (approximately at grid reference 1437/1078).<sup>1</sup> The cave lies 8 km. east of Lachish, 12 km. north-east of Tell Beit Mirsim, and 17 km. west-north-west of Hebron. The hills in the area rise to some 450 m. above sea level, and the region is best defined as the western slope of the Judean range (Fig. 12, p. 91).

Hewn in soft limestone, the cave contains a rectangular ante-chamber measuring 2 X 3 m., and two burial chambers with three benches in each (Fig. 1, Pls. 9, 10A, C). Burial caves containing benches are characteristic of the pre-exilic period. Numerous parallels have been discovered at Beth Shemesh, some few at Lachish, and a single cave of this type at Tell en-Naşbeh.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Antiquities was informed of the discovery of the cave by Mr. S. Dothan of the Jewish National Fund. Excavations were carried out during the month of June 1961, and were possible thanks to the help of the Israel Defence Forces and the JNF. The author was assisted in the field by Messrs. A. Drubs and J. Majjar of the Department of Antiquities, and by Dr. N. K. Gottwald of Boston, Miss Esther Yuval, and Mr. and Mrs. D. Yair. Photographs in the cave were taken by Mr. S. J. Schweig. The parts of the walls bearing graffiti were removed from the cave by Mr. J. Shenhar and were photographed a second time by Mrs. Helene Biebertraut. They are now exhibited at the Archaeological Museum of the Department of Antiquities. The plan was drawn up by Mr. S. Moskowitz after the measurements were taken by Mr. M. Feist. The other drawings in this article were made by Mrs. Margalit Eichelberg and Mrs. Irith Yarden.

The author is indebted to Profs. N. Avigad, D. Flusser, B. Mazar, and Y. Yadin for reading the manuscript and for their valuable remarks.

<sup>2</sup> D. Mackenzie: Excavations at Ain Shems, *PEFA* 2 (1912/13), Pls. V-XI; E. Grant: *Ain Shems Excavations*, I, Haverford, 1931, p. 10; O. Tufnell: *Lachish*, III, London, 1933, Figs. 21, 22, 31; C. C. McCown: *Tell en-Naṣbeh*, I, Berkeley, 1947, Fig. 8. Recently additional tombs of this type were found near the road leading to Mevaseret Yerushalayim; two of them were excavated by Mrs. Ora Negbi of the Department of Antiquities. In all these tombs pre-exilic pottery was found, except for tomb 14 at Beth Shemesh, which was dated to the sixth century B.C. Cf. E. Grant and G. E. Wright: *Ain Shems Excavations*, V, Haverford, 1939, p. 77.

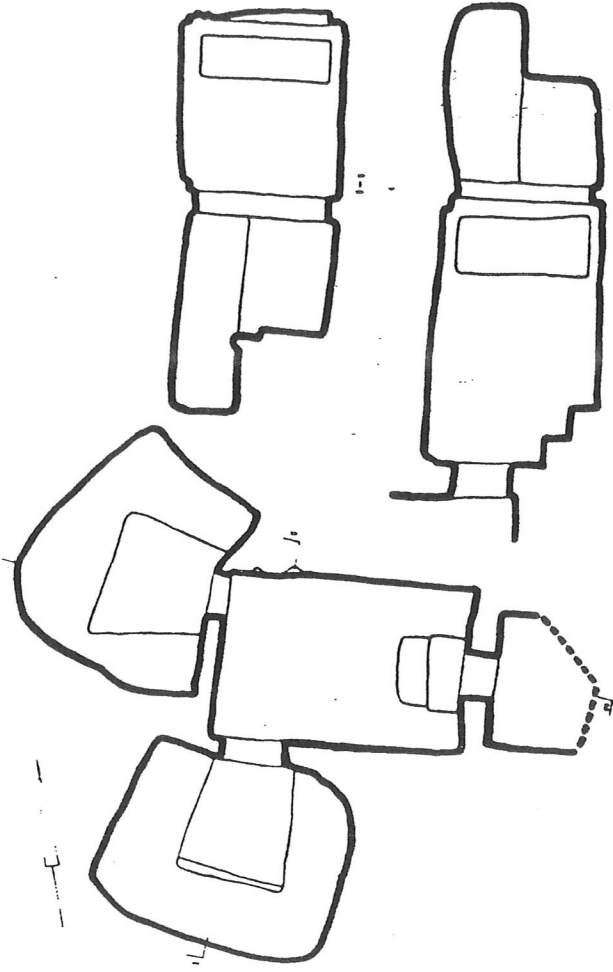


Fig. 1. Plan of the cave.

On the benches were found human bones,<sup>3</sup> a ring and an earring of bronze, and a plaque of the same material doubled over and secured by two nails (Fig. 2:1-3), which may have served as a bracelet-clasp. No earthenware vessels or fragments of pottery were found inside the cave, either on the benches or on the floors of the burial chambers or of the ante-chamber. Some fragments of a pot, most of whose pieces were found outside the cave (see Fig. 2:5), were discovered in the earth which had drifted into the tomb through crevices in the large stones blocking the entrance. A juglet, still whole, was found by the opening outside (Fig. 2:4). These vessels belong to the Persian period.<sup>4</sup>

This particular burial cave differs from other Iron Age caves in the variety

<sup>3</sup> My thanks are due to Dr. N. Haas of the Department of Anatomy of the Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical School, who was kind enough to examine the bones *in situ* and to study them (see below, pp. 93-96).

<sup>4</sup> Juglets of this type are characteristic of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.; compare the juglet with similar ones from Lachish (*Lachish*, III, pp. 303-4, Pl. 77:27), from Tell Abu Hawam (*QDAP* 3 [1934], Pl. 23:3) and from Hazor (*Hazor* III-IV, Pl. 257:15). It should be pointed out that 20 m. to the north of this cave we found another burial cave, consisting of a rectangular room with steps leading to the entrance, in which were pottery fragments from the Persian period. This may perhaps explain the presence of these ceramic finds at the entrance to the cave with the inscriptions. Dr. N. Haas' paper includes a description of the bones from the second tomb as well. It should be mentioned that in the course of our visit to Kh. Beit Lei and to other sites not far from the cave neither Iron Age nor Persian pottery was found.

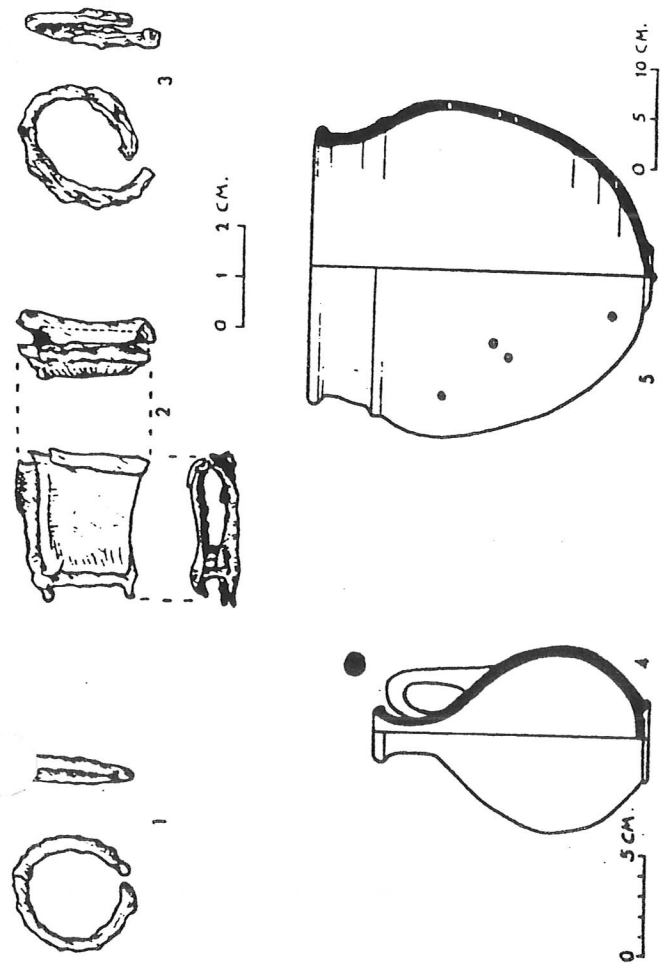


Fig. 2. Bronze and pottery finds.

of graffiti found on the walls of the ante-chamber (Fig. 3). These include three human figures (Figs. 4-6, Pls. 10B, D; 11C), two ships (Fig. 7, Pl. 12D), various circles<sup>a</sup> (Fig. 10, Pl. 11B, E), and a number of inscriptions in

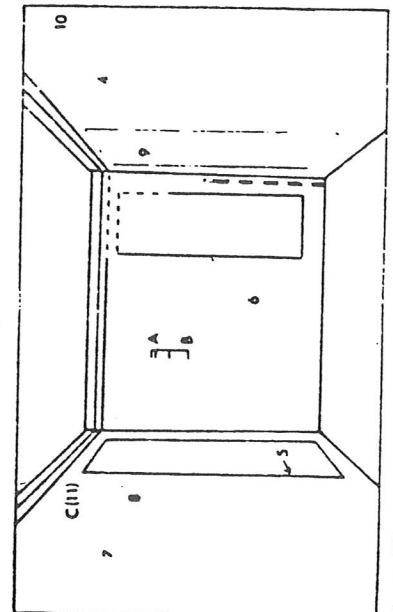


Fig. 3. The ante-chamber (see Pl. 9C) with find spots of graffiti (the numbers indicate Nos. of Figs. in text).

<sup>a</sup> The circular incision on the left in Fig. 10, Pl. 11E recalls the schematic plans of the Assyrian camps, the incision on the right is perhaps a tent. Both are depicted in Assyrian reliefs of the ninth-seventh centuries B. C. I have to thank Prof. Y. Yadin for this observation. See Y. Yadin: *W'arfaraz in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeology*, Ramat-Gan, 1963, Figs. on pp. 293-294, 393 (Hebrew).

vertical strokes.<sup>a</sup> These strokes were scratched in the same place as the drawings and inscriptions. For this reason, when the inscriptions and drawings were copied and deciphered, it was necessary to distinguish between the lines forming part of the inscriptions or drawings and those that had been incised either before or afterwards. An attempt was made to determine what type of stylus-point had been used to produce the graffiti. The type of incision guided us in particular when it came to deciphering the inscriptions, but at this juncture a fresh difficulty arose: as the incisions had been hastily executed in the soft wall, the stylus had jumped over the deeper portions of the rock-face, and in doing so had left certain letters incomplete; others had been partly blurred in spots where the wall jutted out somewhat.

In copying the inscriptions (see especially Fig. 11, Pl. 13 bottom), we did not follow the customary procedure of filling in what seemed to us to be missing (by dotted lines or in other ways), and we reproduced only those clear lines that in our opinion formed part of the inscriptions in question.

### HUMAN FIGURES AND SHIPS

Before going on to discuss the inscriptions at greater length, some mention should be made of the graffiti depicting human beings and ships.

The three human figures are of two types:

- (1) A man holding a kind of lyre (Fig. 4, Pl. 11B, C), and a man raising the palms of his hands as though in prayer (Fig. 5, Pl. 10B). Both show similar characteristics, such as the utilization of vertical strokes, in representing the soles of the feet or the shoes, and the prominent leg muscles. It is likely that

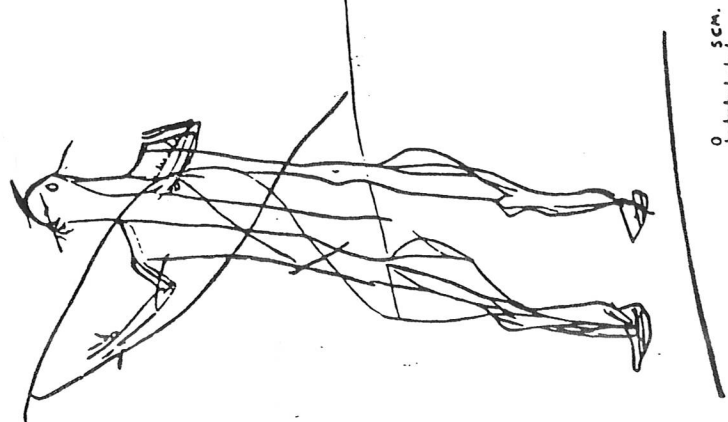


Fig. 4. Figure with 'lyre'.

<sup>a</sup> Similar graffiti which are commonly found in tombs of a later period are discussed at length in E. Testa: *The Graffiti of Tomb 21 at Bethphage, Liber Annuus 11* (1961), pp. 251-287, Figs. 1-3.

both figures were executed by one and the same hand. The 'man with the lyre' is incised on the northern wall of the ante-chamber with his head 1.5 m. above floor level, while the 'praying figure' is scratched into the bottom part of the eastern jamb of the opening to the southern burial chamber (see Fig. 3). This graffito appears to have been executed from a sitting position on the threshold. The incisions in the rock-face had been completely filled in by earth drifting through and covering the graffito, a fact which hampered us when we came to photograph the figure, and to make an accurate copy.

(2) The third figure shows different characteristics; here we have a deep carving which emphasizes the man's dress and headgear (Fig. 6, Pl. 10D). This figure is to be found on the western wall at a height of 70 cm. above the floor.

Whereas the human form is a common pictorial theme, the representations of ships found on the southern wall of the ante-chamber (Fig. 7, Pl. 12D) provided an unexpected discovery: it is hardly likely that the inhabitants of this region had any connection with seafaring or fishing, and yet we have here two sailing vessels, schematically portrayed but realistic enough for all that. The representation of ships in this tomb may be connected with religious beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Three ships are drawn on the wall of the ante-chamber of a burial cave in Jerusalem dating from the reign of Alexander Jannaeus; see L. Y. Rahmani: The Tomb of Jason, *'Atiqot* 4 (in press) (Hebrew). From this find Rahmani concluded that members of some seafaring family had been buried in the cave. A ship belonging roughly to the same period was incised over a bench at the entrance to the place in Masada, see Y. Aharoni and B. Rothenberg: *In the Steps of Kings and Rebels in the Judean Desert*, Tel Aviv, 1960, pp. 18-20, Fig. 2 (Hebrew). The various ships carved or drawn on the walls of the caves at Beth She'arim were explained by Mazar, among other possibilities, as introduced 'by the influence of foreign sepulchral art, both oriental (Egyptian in particular)

### SMALLER INSCRIPTIONS

Between the line separating the ships on the right hand side and the entrance to the southern burial chamber, we copied the following letters (Fig. 8, Pl. 12A, C):

א  
ארר  
שרמור

At the beginning of the first line there is a superfluous *aleph*. It would appear that the writer noticed the incisions on the left of this particular *aleph* (Pl. 12C) only after making this letter. He decided to pass them over and start writing afresh. In the second line there is the space of one letter between the last *resh* and the long line; it may well be that the diagonal stroke copied in Fig. 8 is part of an additional letter—the last one of this inscription.

Although each letter can be clearly identified, we cannot suggest any satisfactory reading. On the face of it the root ארר is quite in place for that type of inscription found in burial caves, where all are warned not to open the tomb and touch the contents, under pain of curse.<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, the following tentative reading might be suggested:

אֲרִיכָר יִשָּׁר מְחֹרֶר \* *Cursed be he who will rob the chamber*. But such a reading presents difficulties, and for two reasons: firstly it would involve turning twice a clear *resh* into a *dalet*, and secondly because no utensils or objects of any nature (save for a ring, an earring and the fragment of a bracelet which were on the bodies of the dead) were found. There is no reason to believe that there

and Greek, in which this theme is emphasized as a result of religious beliefs', cf. B. Mazar-Maisler: *Beth She'arim*. I, Jerusalem, 1957, pp. 102, 155-156, Fig. 12, Pls. XXIII:1, 2 (Hebrew). Goodenough develops this theory still further, cf. E. R. Goodenough: *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, VIII, New York, 1958, pp. 157-165. For a general discussion of ships see also R. D. Barnett: *Early Shipping in the Near East*, *Antiquity* 32 (1958), pp. 220-230; M. Avi-Yonah: *Oriental Elements in the Art of Palestine in the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, *QDAP* 10 (1944), pp. 148-151. Cf. N. Avigad: *The Epitaph of a Royal Steward from Siloam Village, IEJ* 3 (1953), pp. 137-152. This was suggested by Dr. J. Liver. In connection with the word ארר see N. Avigad: *The Second Tomb-Inscription of the Royal Steward, IEJ* 3 (1955), pp. 153-166.



Fig. 6. Figure with headgear.

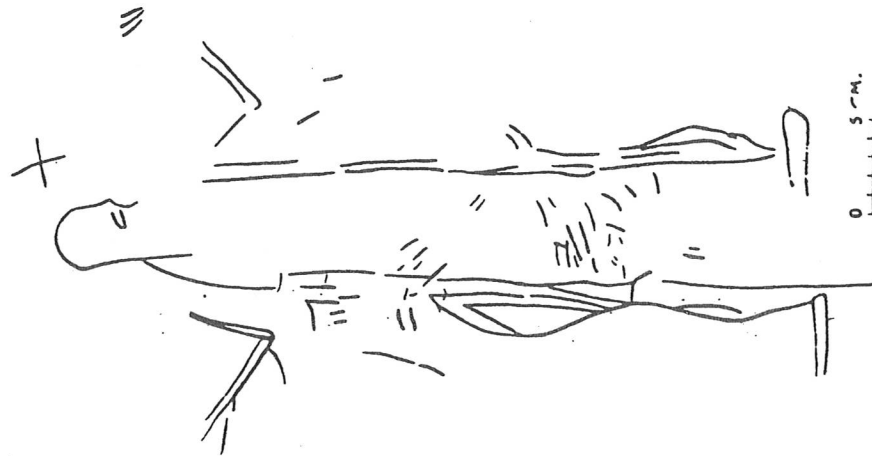


Fig. 7. Figure 'praying'.

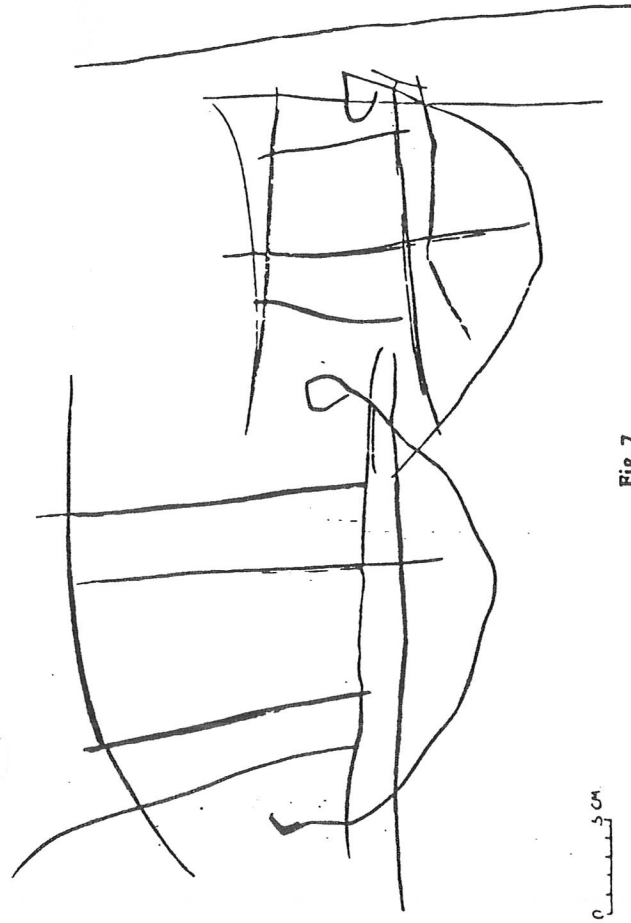


Fig. 7.

were such in the tomb and that they were taken away, since the skeletons were found undisturbed in their original position (see below, pp. 89-90 and the article by N. Haas, below, pp. 93-96).

There is no valid reason why the two lines should be considered as forming one inscription. The letters **אור** appear with slight variations in several other places on the walls of the ante-chamber (see below), and hence we can consider the bottom line separately. The letters **אור** could perhaps be read 'ים' (Yam) implying that a man by the name of **ים** drew the ships to the left of this inscription,<sup>10</sup> but this possibility also presents considerable difficulties. Thus we can only present the inscription without suggesting a satisfactory reading.

**אור** in a number of variations appears three more times: on the western wall between the two longer inscriptions we read the letters **אור** (Pl. 13); on the northern wall, within an outline which was marked out for an opening not constructed, we find, besides a number of incisions of single letters (particularly **kaph** and **resh**), a line of four letters; **אור** (Fig. 9, Pl. 11A, D). Near

<sup>10</sup> This was suggested by Mrs. Ora Negbi.

<sup>11</sup> Although the **het** is quite clear, the intention may have been to write **אור** — 'he is cursed' or 'may he be cursed'.

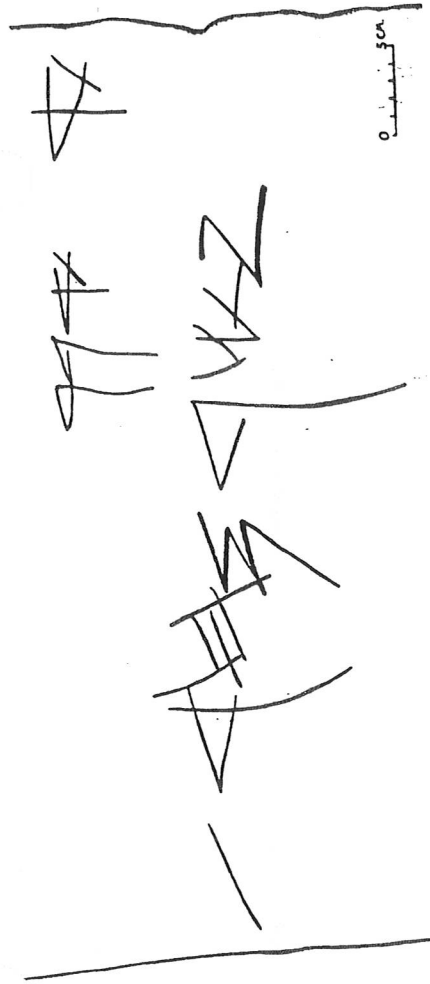


Fig. 8.

two circles incised on the northern wall (see above, n. 5) we also copied the letters **אור** (Fig. 10, Pl. 11E, F).

Thus we found four words containing the root **אור** on three walls (the northern, the southern, and the western). For this we have no satisfactory

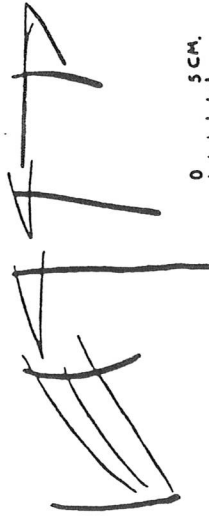


Fig. 9.

explanation, but we may hazard a guess that these inscriptions have a magical purpose and were designed to lay a curse upon somebody, perhaps some enemy.

### THE MAIN INSCRIPTIONS

The three main inscriptions, which will be discussed in detail, have been classified as A, B, C.

On the western wall we can discern three lines of writing (Fig. 3, Pl. 13). Between the second and third lines there is a wider space than between the two upper lines. Within this space are the letters **אור**. The two upper lines form inscription A, and the lower line inscription B.

A. As the inscriptions described above show, the letters were not always carefully written—they are indeed graffiti. This should be borne in mind when con-

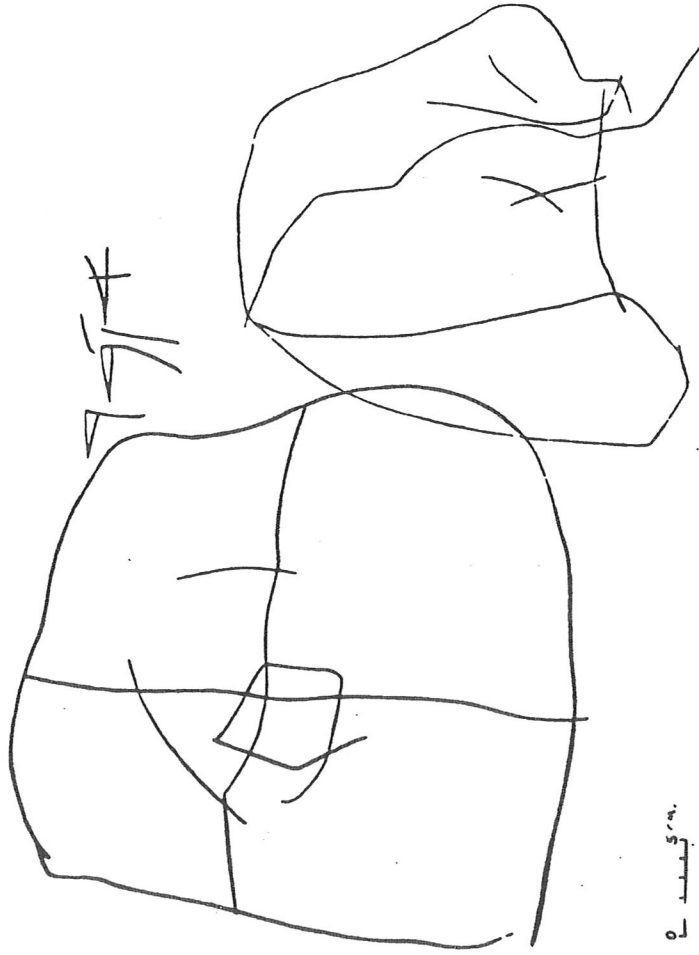


Fig. 10.

sidering inscription A, although it was written by a person with a fairly good handwriting.

The first line was incised at a height of 1.5 m., in other words at the eye-level of a standing man. Of the fifteen letters in this line, ten are quite clear. The second letter is a clear *he*, the fifth to eighth letters read *אלהי* and the last five letters read *האנני*. The ninth and tenth letters are particularly difficult. The first of these may be a clumsily made *kaph*. The hand of the writer seems to have moved aside and jumped upwards in the execution of the horizontal stroke.<sup>12</sup> The second letter appears to be a *lamed*. We consider the descending diagonal stroke (Pl. 13 top) to be an incision of no significance, such as are found in great numbers on this wall.

<sup>12</sup> Upon examining the *yods* in this inscription, most of them are seen to have an interrupted vertical stroke: first of all the upper slightly curved stroke was incised, and then, after making the angle on the right hand side, the writer stopped short. In most cases the stylus did not return to its original place in order to complete the *yod*, but moved a little. We see a similar deviation in the *kaph* in question. Such a phenomenon could be explained by the poor lighting in the cave into which light entered only through the narrow entrance on the eastern side. Whereas the graffiti on the northern and southern walls were thrown into relief by the shadow, the graffiti on the western wall did not stand out clearly. Explanation was arrived at after a conversation with Dr. D. Diringet.

At the beginning of the top line a slightly curved horizontal line characteristic of the letter *yod* can be discerned. The second letter is a *he*, as already stated. Next comes a vertical line, apparently a remnant of the letter *waw*. Finally we find a vertical line topped by a long horizontal line extending far to the right; after comparing these remnants with the other letters of this inscription, it seems likely that they belong to a *he*. Hence the first four letters form the word *יהוה*.

After dividing the letters in the top line into words we read: *יהוה אל* *אלהי* *האנני*, the last *he* being the beginning of the next word, which is continued in the second line.

At the beginning of the second line two letters are lightly incised; the first one seems to be a *resh*, although the vertical stroke has a diagonal tendency. The second letter is a *yod*. In this letter as with most of the *yods* in this inscription the writer made a break after incising the angle at the top right hand side of the letter (see n. 12). In contrast to the other *yods*, however, he incised here the letter anew, save that he forgot to make the central horizontal stroke. Further on, in the same line, we can distinguish clearly a *yod* and a *he*. Of the fifth letter, a vertical stroke topped by a short horizontal line has been preserved, which could be part of a *waw* or of a *daleth*. If we take these vestiges to be a *waw*, we get the combination *יהוה*. It is unlikely that such a combination of letters could be the theophoric element of a personal name, in conjunction with any of the letters coming before or after. We therefore prefer to read the letter as *daleth*, thus obtaining the words *יהוה יהוה*, the mountains of Judah.<sup>13</sup>

After that come two rather difficult letters, of which the first is especially problematic. The sharp angle could easily be part of an *aleph*, a *bet*, a *daleth* or a *resh*. However, we may assume from the context that we have here an awkwardly written *lamed*. The next letter is in our opinion a *waw*, but the short

<sup>13</sup> The word *יהוה* (or *יהוה* in *plene*), the Aramaic name of the province of Judah during the Persian period, appears on stamped jar handles from the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. The fact that the final *he* in our inscription is lacking does not exclude the possibility of reading *יהוה*; cf. *שחקיה* in the Gezer calendar, *יהוה* in the Siloam inscription and *יהוה* in the Lachish letters. From the material available it is difficult to determine how these words were pronounced (pace F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman: *Early Hebrew Onomography*, New Haven, 1952, pp. 47, 50, 52). See also the difference between *ketiv* and *qeri* in the words *יהוה* (2 Kings 9:37), *יהוה* (Ezek. 23:43, Psalms 74:6), *יהוה* (Psalms 6:4, Eccl. 7:22, Neh. 9:6), *יהוה* (Gen. 24, 34; Deut. 22) and also *יהוה* (Gen. 22) and *יהוה* (Prov. 30:18), which can be compared with *יהוה* in ostraca 6 from Meşad Hashavyahu, cf. *IEJ* 12 (1962), pp. 30-31.

diagonal stroke crossing the neck of the letter has been extended in this case, as the writer made a flourish. Hence we read the word לו.

The five following letters are separated from the last word by a vertical line. The fifth letter is a clear *yod*. The first and third letters are apparently *lamed*. Between them we can discern the vestiges of an *aleph*. Of the fourth letter there remains a long horizontal line divided in the centre by a vertical stroke. This long horizontal line could only be explained in our view as part of a *he*. These five letters combine to form the word לאלי.

The last word presents no problems and is clearly to be read as ירושלם. Our proposed reading for the two uppermost lines is as follows:

יהוה אלי כל הארץ  
יהי לו לאלי ירושלם

*Yahveh (is) the God of the whole earth; the mountains of Judah belong to him, to the God of Jerusalem.*

Strangely enough the phrase יהוה כל הארץ *God of the whole earth*, appears once only in the Bible, in Isaiah 54:5 'The Lord of Hosts is his name, and thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, the God of the whole earth (אלי כל הארץ) shall he be called.' We also find in Genesis 24:3 'The God of heaven and the God of the earth (אלי הארץ)'; but the concept of God as ruler over the whole earth is very frequent in the Bible. We find appellations such as 'Judge of all the earth', 'Lord of all the earth', 'King over all the earth', and 'High above all the earth',<sup>10</sup> and also the phrase 'for all the earth is mine' (לי).<sup>11</sup>

The use of the *lamed* in the possessive genitive appears here later in the inscription: יהרי יהודא that is, 'the mountains of Judah belong to him.' The form יהרי יהודה is found only in 2 Chron. 21:11 (LXX and Vulg. read יהודה, 'ערי יהודה) while the form יהודה יהרי in the singular is more common.<sup>12</sup>

Syntactically speaking no difficulty is presented by the emphasis לו, יהרי ירושלם but the appellation 'the God of Jerusalem' is somewhat surpris-

<sup>10</sup> This is the earliest Hebrew inscription mentioning ירושלם. The word also appears (around a five-pointed star) in seal impressions from the Persian period.

<sup>11</sup> Josh. 3:13, Micah 4:13, Zech. 4:14, 6:5; Psalms 97:5.

<sup>12</sup> Psalms 83:19, 97:9.

<sup>13</sup> Exod. 19:5; see also Psalms 24:1 (לוהוה הארץ והלואה).

<sup>14</sup> לוהוה הארץ והלואה (לוהוה הארץ והלואה) (לוהוה הארץ והלואה).

<sup>15</sup> with a *waw* and not with a *he*, as we might have assumed from the study of Gross and Freed-

man, *op. cit.* (above, n. 13), pp. 46-47, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Compare for instance Num. 32:33, Josh. 1:2, Judges 21:7, Ezek. 45:5 and also 1 Sam. 28:17 and

2 Sam. 18:32.

ing, although it is also found once in the Bible, in 2 Chron. 32:19, in the description of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem. According to this verse, the Assyrians spoke 'against the God of Jerusalem as against the gods of the peoples of the earth which were the work of the hands of man' (see below, pp. 90-91).

B. The third line was incised at a height of 1.2 m., since the letters אר, beneath the first two lines, were apparently scratched at a previous date. This inscription is harder to read, because the incisions are not as deep as in the two upper lines; the script also is more careless. The meaningless lines scratched mainly in the right hand part of the inscription interfere with the decipherment. The reading we suggest is proffered with very considerable reservations.

After careful examination we can discern the first two letters, which we assume to be a *he* and a *mem*. Then comes a letter which is repeated further on in the same line. This letter, which at first sight resembles a *qoph*, may be read as a *waw* in which the horizontal stroke crossing the neck of the letter curves at the right hand side. Further on we can perhaps distinguish a *resh*, a *yod*, and the vestiges of a *he*. We propose reading the word יהוה.

We are inclined to identify the next three, carelessly written, letters as the word אלה. Next, after a fairly clear *het*, are two diagonal lines which could belong to two of the letters *bet* (?), *kaph*, *mem*, *nun*, and *pe*. From the context (see below) we propose to complete these lines to represent two *nuns*. Coming after the word אלה, we might have expected the next letter to be a *waw*. and perhaps the two strokes which touch at their extremities can be considered as a badly formed *waw*. If the above assumption is correct, these four letters can be completed to read מנח.

The three following letters stand out clearly, and in our opinion they form the word בנה. The *yod* following is also clear, after which there seems to be an additional *he*, forming the word יה. We propose reading the last four letters of this line as the word יהוה.

<sup>17</sup> The idea that Jerusalem is the city of God is found in the Psalms (46:5; 48:2, 9; 87:3; 101:8). Vitezen points out that apart from Psalm 87 all are generally thought to be pre-exilic. Although in the Bible the gods of the Gentiles are called according to the names of their cities (2 Kings 1, 18:34, 2 Chron. 28:23), the concept 'God of Jerusalem' is not common, because the rule of Yahveh is not restricted from a territorial point of view. This does not necessarily exclude the use of the appellation 'God of Jerusalem' among the people. Thus far in accordance with Th. C. Vitezen: *Yahweh en zijn Stad*, Amsterdam, 1962, pp. 3-6, n. 12. It should be noted that the expression יהוה יהודה in Chron. 32:19 follows that of עמי ירושלם (v. 18) and is used in comparison with יהוה יהודה.

At this point we may advance a tentative reading for this inscription:

המוריה אתה חוננת נוח יה יהוה  
*The (Mount of) Moriah Thou hast favoured, the dwelling of Yab, Yabueh.*

Only on two occasions Moriah is mentioned in the Bible: In Genesis 22:2 ('the land of Moriah') המריה is written without a *waw*, whereas a *waw* is found, as in our inscription,<sup>24</sup> in 2 Chron. 3:1 ('Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah'). If the above reading of inscription B is correct, it seems very plausible that the Moriah should be described in poetical language as נוח יה יהוה.<sup>25</sup>

Our reading of the two *nuns* in the word חוננת is based on Psalms 102:13: 'Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favour her (לחננה) yea, the set time, is come.'

C. This inscription is incised on the southern wall, above the inscription in Fig. 8, at a height of 1.75 m. (Fig. 11, Pl. 12A, B). The third letter, a *shin*, is clear. Next comes a square 'ayin, whose lower horizontal stroke is drawn out to the left, apparently as a result of the writer's flourish.<sup>26</sup> The first letter resembles a *daleth*, but after careful consideration we believe that the diagonal line on the

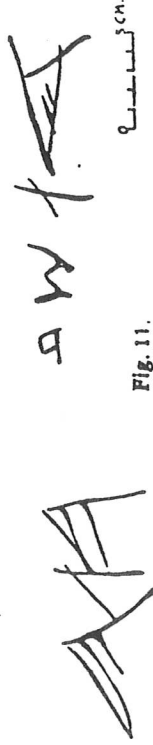


Fig. 11.

left is accidental. Next to it there are clear signs of the two lower horizontal lines of the letter *he*. The *waw* coming between the *he* and the *shin* is without a head. The same is true for the *waw* in the second word, which comes between two letters appearing to be two *hes*.

We propose reading this inscription as follows:<sup>27</sup>

[Ya]bueh deliver (us)! חוננת יהוה

<sup>24</sup> *Waw* instead of *yod*, the first letter of the root נחם; cf. הנוח in the Siluam inscription.

<sup>25</sup> For נוח as the dwelling place of God, see 2 Sam. 15:25 and compare Exod. 15:13, Jer. 31:22; the combination יהוה-נוח appears in Isa. 26:4, and יהוה-נוח in Psalms 68:19.

<sup>26</sup> Compare with the letter *waw* in לו (inscription A).

<sup>27</sup> When the inscription began to decipher inscription B, the contents of inscription A were already known to him. It may well be, therefore, that the suggested reading of B is subjective. On the

The inscription חוננת יהוה is an appeal to God for salvation. The idea that God redeems the individual from his affliction, and in particular delivers the people from the hands of their enemies, is one of the most common in the Bible.

### THE DATING *Palaeography*

Since the typology of ancient Hebrew scripts is based on monumental inscriptions or on ostraca written in ink by scribes, we find it very difficult to draw precise chronological conclusions from the form of the letters in these graffiti.<sup>28</sup> In our opinion palaeography can only be of auxiliary value here when it comes to preferring one date to another (see below, p. 92).

The letter forms vary greatly. This is seen for instance in the letter *waw* which has a different form in each inscription. The variants stand out even more in the three *nuns* found in the three inscriptions in this cave: the *mem* in ישראח is reminiscent of the *nuns* in the Gezer calendar and the Mesha stele, but it appears as late as c. 700 B. C. in the Royal Steward inscription, whereas the last letter in the word ירשם resembles the *mem* of a number of seventh century Hebrew seals. The *mem* in the word המוריה is different yet again from the two mentioned above. If we adhere to the rules of palaeography, we shall have to date ישראח earlier than inscription A, which is unlikely: we believe that all the inscriptions in this cave were made within a short period of time, and all that can be distinguished are different styles of handwriting. In contrast to the variations in the letters *waw* and *mem*, we can discern almost complete uniformity in the way the letter *aleph* is written: this letter has for the most part an additional diagonal stroke.<sup>29</sup> Parallels have recently been found in the monumental inscription of the Royal Steward<sup>30</sup> and in the graffiti from Gibeon.<sup>31</sup> Avigad dates this *aleph* approximately to 700

either hand the deciphering of inscription C was objective: the author asked Mrs. Eichelberg (who knew nothing of the contents of the other inscriptions and has no acquaintance with ancient Hebrew script) to copy the lines which seemed to her to be relevant, whereupon she produced Fig. 11. It was only as a result of this drawing that the author succeeded in reading חוננת יהוה.

<sup>28</sup> Pritchard too encountered this difficulty on the graffiti on jar handles at Gibeon, cf. J. B. Pritchard: *Hebrew Inscriptions and Stamps from Gibeon*, Philadelphia, 1959, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Apart from the *aleph* in אורח (Fig. 10); the *aleph* in the word לאחיה is incomplete, and in Pl. 13 bottom we only copied those vestiges still visible.

<sup>30</sup> N. Avigad, *op. cit.* (above, n. 8), p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.* (above, n. 28), Nos. 17, 21-22, 48, 49.

B. C.,<sup>32</sup> while Pritchard and Cross attribute this type of *aleph* found in Gibeon to the sixth century B. C.<sup>33</sup>

### Relative Chronology

There is, in our opinion, a simple means of determining the relative chronology of the various graffiti which appear one below the other: most of the inscriptions and the drawings were incised at a height of 1.5 m., namely, at the eye-level of a man standing erect (see Fig. 3). Thus on the northern wall, the letters *אוריח* and *אורי*, the head of the figure with the lyre, and the tops of the circles, illustrated in Fig. 10 and Pl. 11B, E, were incised at this optimum height. This is also the case with inscription A on the western wall: the writer began his incision at a height of roughly 1.5 m., but as he wrote, the line dropped somewhat because of the cleft in the wall. Once the level of this optimum height was full, the next writer was forced to bend down somewhat or stand on tip-toe, and write either below or above the occupied area. We therefore assume that the letters *אורי* which were incised at a height of 1.3 m., are later than inscription A, and that inscription B, which was incised at a height of 1.2 m., is later still.<sup>34</sup>

In the southern wall there is a crack precisely at the height of 1.5 m., and therefore the tops of the ships were drawn at a height of 1.45 m. The letters *אורי* come at a height of 1.4 m. above the floor of the chamber, whereas *אוריח* was written at a height of 1.3 m.<sup>35</sup> Palaeographically, there could be two possibilities for determining the time-relationship between these two lines. If they belong to one inscription, then the *mem* (which resembles that of

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.* (above, n. 8), p. 150-152 and N. Avigad: Some Notes on the Hebrew Inscriptions from Gibeon, *IEJ* 9 (1959), p. 132.

<sup>33</sup> Cross recently made an attempt (*F. M. Cross: BASOR* 165 [1962], pp. 36-38, nn. 10-13; *BASOR* 168 [1962], pp. 18 ff.) to study the history of this *aleph* and traced it back to the second half of the eighth century B.C. (the recent dating of Yadin) in ostrakon No. 2 line 5 from Samaria (S. A. Birnbaum: *The Hebrew Script*, London, 1954-57, No. 6) and perhaps also No. 42. Cross also determined that this *aleph* appears in simplified form at the close of the seventh century in Mejad Havyahu (*IEJ* 10 [1960], p. 137, n. 8, Figs. 1, 3) and afterwards in the sixth century at Gibeon in a degenerate style.

<sup>34</sup> The figure wearing the headgear was apparently incised from a sitting or kneeling position, as was also the case with the figure on the doorjamb of the southern burial chamber, which was executed by a person sitting on the threshold.

<sup>35</sup> The inscription *אוריח* *אורי*, which was incised above these two lines at a height of 1.75 m., is in our opinion the last of the graffiti to be executed on the southern wall and perhaps in the cave as a whole.

the Gezer calender and the Mesha stele) and this peculiar type of *aleph* should be regarded as of the same period. If these two lines belonged to two different inscriptions, then the early *mem* would have to be dated after the later *aleph*, according to the technical standard outlined above.

In view of the nature of the graffiti, we assume that all the inscriptions and the drawings belong to a short period of time, and that they were incised by a number of persons, in circumstances which we shall attempt to elucidate below.

### Contents and Attendant Circumstances

The form of the burial cave as well as the script are characteristic of the pre-exilic period. Taking into consideration the widest possible range there is no reason to date them later than the sixth century B. C. Even this range is proposed only in view of tomb 14 in Beth Shemesh and Cross' dating of the Gibeon graffiti.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, it would be very difficult to antedate the pottery illustrated in Fig. 2:4-5 to the fifth century B. C. In our opinion these vessels are to be considered as fixing the *terminus ad quem*: they reached the place where they were found at the time when the entrance to the cave was sealed, or at a later time.

If we compare the expressions found in the inscriptions with corresponding biblical terms, we find that most of the parallels are not earlier than the Persian period. *אורי* *אוריח* and *אורי* *אוריח* are found only once in Chronicles. Some forms of spelling (*אוריח* with a *ש* *אוריח* and *אורי* without a final *ה*) have also only post-exilic parallels. However, we do not think it possible to bridge the extremes offered by the different criteria, and to date the cave to the end of the sixth century B. C. We prefer to draw on the indications given by archaeological and palaeographical analyses. But since these, too, do not provide a definite date, only one way remains open—to attempt to find some historical hint in the contents of the main inscriptions. To be sure, such reasoning will be hypothetical only, especially as the reading of the inscriptions remains problematic and that of one inscription is only tentative.

The contents of these inscriptions are quite obviously religious. Inscription A (and perhaps inscription B, if our reading is correct), is in poetic rhythm and recalls biblical psalmody both in form and in content. In our opinion, the fact that no sherds were found in the burial cave containing undisturbed burials, proves

<sup>36</sup> See above, nn. 2 and 33, as well as W. F. Albright: *BASOR* 159 (1960), p. 37.

that no offerings for the dead were placed there.<sup>37</sup> Since all Iron Age tombs discovered so far in Judah contained such offerings, we may perhaps assume that the people who buried their dead in this cave refrained from offerings in accordance with certain religious beliefs.<sup>38</sup> We might hazard a guess that this burial cave belonged to a family of Levite singers. A hint in this direction may be found in the suggested contents of the drawings: a man with a lyre, a praying figure, and a man with headgear (priestly or Levitic?).<sup>39</sup> Since it is unlikely that many ordinary folk were acquainted with the art of writing, the explanation that a number of Levites visited this cave is relatively plausible.

What do these inscriptions purport to express, and why were they incised on the wall of the cave? Since no other examples are known so far, the explanation is not easy. Even if we accept the theory that a family of Levites was buried here, we cannot content ourselves with the answer that these are conventional prayers said on the occasion of a burial. Perhaps some information concerning their date and the circumstances of their writing can be deduced from inscriptions A-C.

Inscription A is made up of two appellations of Yahveh: אלהי כל הארץ and its parallel אלהי ירושלים. We consider the main point of the inscription to be the words יהי לנו יהוה. Here we have a pronouncement that the mountains of Judah—namely the area in question—belong to the Lord, the universal God. Why did the writer deem it necessary to express himself in such a way, and why do we have here this territorial restriction of the Lord אלהי ירושלים?

The use of the appellation 'the God of Jerusalem' is apt for the God who dwells in Zion, but it acquired additional stress when all the country with the exception of Jerusalem was subjugated by the enemy (see above, p. 85, and n. 23). In such a light inscription A may be understood to mean: Yahveh is the Lord of the whole earth, he is the universal God, and he is at one and the same time

<sup>37</sup> The skeletons were found in their original position. See below, pp. 93 ff. and above, pp. 79-80.

<sup>38</sup> Deut. 26:14 does not forbid offering food to the dead: the intention is למה נתתי כבוד למות . . . 'not given ought thereof (of the tithe) for the dead', since all the tithe was given 'unto the Levite and unto the stranger and to the fatherless and to the widow according to all thy commandments' (*ibid.* 13). The presentation of an offering to the deceased was a custom common throughout the ancient Near East, including Israel. See N. H. Tur-Sinai: *Ha-Lashon ve-ha-Sefer*, III, Jerusalem, 1953, pp. 156-163, 233-241 (Hebrew); R. de Vaux: *Les Institutions de l'ancien Testament*, I, Paris, 1958, pp. 98-99.

<sup>39</sup> This explanation was finally arrived at during a conversation between Prof. D. Flusser and the author.

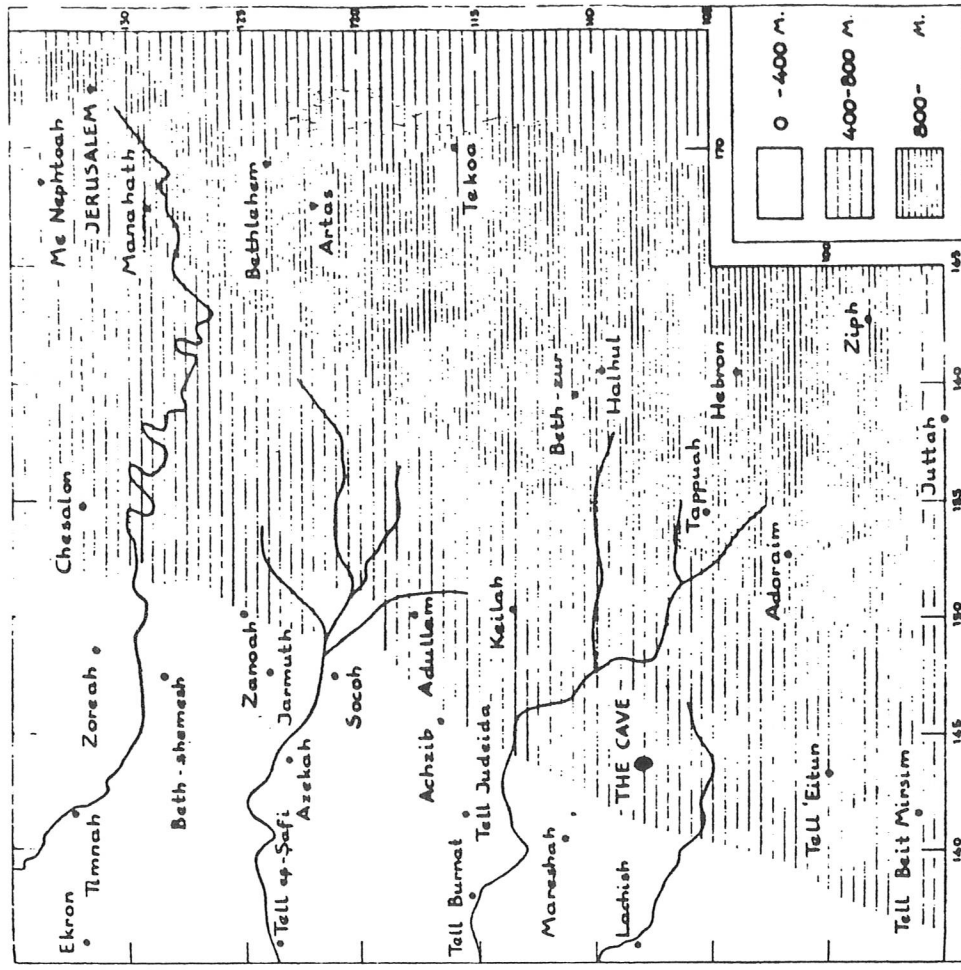


Fig. 12. Map showing the site of the cave.

the national God, the God of Israel. The God has chosen his people: 'Ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people, for all the earth is mine' (Exod. 19:5). The man who made inscription A, being an inhabitant of the mountains of Judah, declares according to this concept that the mountains of Judah also belong to God, even though at this particular moment the political sway of his people is confined to Jerusalem.

If we are not mistaken in the reading of inscription B, it would appear that it develops this idea: Jerusalem has been saved; Yahveh has spared his holy city and his abode on Mount Moriah; so will the mountain of Judah also be

saved and their inhabitants delivered. This prayer seems to be expressed in simple form in inscription C: *השע ייחא*.

From the point of view of content these inscriptions are well suited to the period of Hezekiah, when Sennacherib conquered forty-six towns in Judah and kept Hezekiah besieged in Jerusalem 'like a caged bird'.<sup>40</sup> The king of Assyria set up his headquarters in Lachish and had its inhabitants exiled or put to death by impaling.<sup>41</sup> It may be that the people who happened to come to this cave and write the various inscriptions did not do so in the course of a regular visit to their family tomb, but perhaps during the burial of one of their members who was killed by the enemy; or perhaps in an hour of danger, when the armies of the enemy passed this way, they found refuge in the family burial cave until the danger was over.

After the siege of Sennacherib, there was a widespread belief among the people that Jerusalem would always be saved. Hence our hypothesis could well be suited to circumstances of a similar nature but of a later period—as for instance during Nebuchadnezzar's campaigns against Judah, when most of Judah was already conquered, and the people hoped that Jerusalem would be saved. Of these two events, which occurred more than a century apart, we would prefer, on palaeographic grounds, the earlier, and we propose to relate the inscriptions to the reign of Hezekiah.

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<sup>40</sup> D. D. Luckenbill: *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, II, Chicago, 1927, pp. 119-121, § 240.

<sup>41</sup> 2 Kings 18:14, 17; J. B. Pritchard: *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, Princeton, 1954, No. 373.

## THE CAVE INSCRIPTIONS FROM KHIRBET BEIT LEI

*Frank Moore Cross, Jr.*

### I

IN 1963 Dr. Joseph Naveh published a group of important inscriptions, graffiti scratched on the antechamber wall of a tomb of bench-type cut in the eastern slope of Khirbet Beit Lei (Bayt Layy), a site some eight kilometers east of ancient Lachish.<sup>1</sup> The inscriptions of the west and south walls are of unique interest in view of their content, but difficult to decipher.

The hindrances to decipherment are several. The surface of the soft limestone wall is covered with pickmarks and is uneven. Scratches cover the wall in various patterns, and are often difficult to distinguish from the lines forming letters made by a crude stylus. Moreover, the wall surface has suffered some damage either by weathering or by gouge, as we can determine in areas where the decipherment is certain. As Naveh has remarked, certain letters are blurred, others incomplete. A few are missing, apparently, owing to scraping and/or deterioration of the surface. Unfortunately, the character of the surface and the texture of lines made by the engraver's stylus are not always obvious in photographs. Advances in decipherment require work upon the original now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem<sup>2</sup> (see fig. 1).

In the main our decipherment differs little from the pioneer readings of Naveh, whose excellent eye for form is well known. However, the readings proposed here are far-reaching in significance for the interpretation of the texts.

#### 1. Inscription A (West Wall)

The inscription is bounded on the right and left by deep lines, probably drawn at the time when the inscription was made. The text consists of two lines, separated from Inscription B (probably written by the same

scribe) by the letters 'alef reš, for 'ar[ūr] scrawled several times elsewhere in the tomb.

Naveh read:

1. ywhw 'lhy kl h'rš h
2. ry yhd lw l'lhy yršlm

1. "Yahveh (is) the God of the whole earth; the mountain-lands of Judah [Yēhūd!] belong to him, to the God of Jerusalem."

There are a number of difficulties. Line 1 begins well to the left of line 2 and line 1 of Inscription B, as well as the margin line. Moreover, traces of the letters *yod* and *nun* (or perhaps *kaf*) appear to the right of Naveh's first word *ywhw*. Finally, there is evidence of erosion on the right at the beginning of both lines 1 and 2.

The *lamed* of *kl* in line 1 is impossible. It is scratched deeper than the scribe's usual ductus; it is too short, too much on the vertical, and its hook at this period is utterly anomalous. Finally, it is too small and too crowded to be taken as a letter.

The use of the article *he* is odd in a poetic or semipoetic context (see below). *He* at the end of the line is expected to be the end of a word; there is no word divider before it, and there is ample space for letters after it.

There are a number of problems in the second line as well. Most glaring are: the reading *yhd*, an Aramaic form; the tortured syntax of the sentence; and, above all, the reading *lw* for *lō*. The last-mentioned reading we regard as impossible. *Waw* does not become a vowel letter for *ō* before the fourth century in Hebrew.<sup>8</sup> The suffix is always written with *-h* (i.e., *lh*).

We wish to decipher the text as follows:

1. 'l' n' yš. ywhw[.] 'lhykh.<sup>9</sup> 'ršh
  2. 'rj. yhdh<sup>8</sup> wg'ly.<sup>9</sup> yršlm
- 'ānī<sup>10</sup> yahwē 'ēlōhēkā  
'eršē 'ārē yēhūdā  
wēgā'altī yērūšālēm

I am Yahweh thy God:  
I will accept the cities of Judah,  
And will redeem Jerusalem.

The text is obviously poetic, a rubric and a parallelistic bicolon symmetrically balanced in syllable count: 8/7/8. The formulaic pair 'ārē yēhūdā / yērūšālēm is familiar.<sup>12</sup> Parallels to this use of the roots

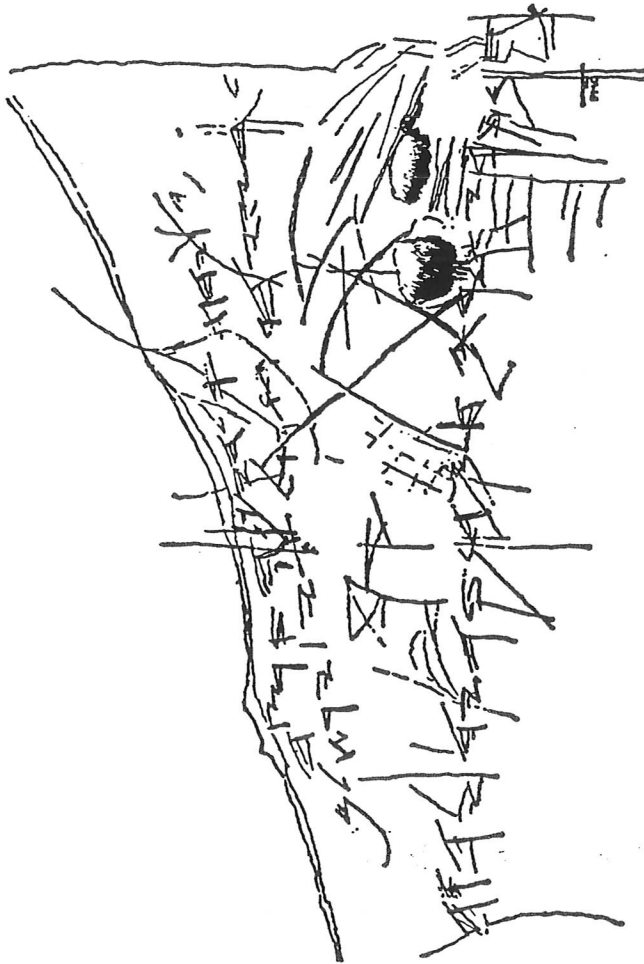


Figure 1. Inscriptions A and B from a cave near Khirbet Beit Lei. The drawing is traced from a photograph and checked against the original now in the Israel Museum. Lines adjacent to the letters have been included in the drawing and a few more distant to suggest the character of limestone surface. However, most of the distant lines and scratches have been ignored.

*ršy* and *g'l* are frequent. For example, compare Psalm 85:2 *ršyt yhw'h* 'ršk, "Thou hast accepted, O Yahweh, thy land," and Isa 52:9: *ky-nhm yhw'h 'mw g'l yršlm*, "For Yahweh has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem."

We shall return to questions of interpretation of Inscription A after dealing with the other major texts.

## 2. Inscription B (West Wall)

As we have noted, the inscription appears to be in the same hand as inscription A. Naveh reads:

hmwryh 'th hñnt nwh yh yhw'h

"The (mount of) Moriah thou hast favored,  
the dwelling of Yah, Yahveh."

This decipherment also has a number of difficulties. I do not believe that the initial *he* of the line exists. It stands outside the margin; it is not a normal form; the horizontals do not narrow in triangular fashion as is the case with all other *hês* in all three major texts, and is characteristic of sixth-century forms; *hñnt* is anomalous, and the entire phrase *hmwryh 'th hñnt* is awkward if not bad Hebrew. The phrase *nwh yh yhw'h* is also very strange. Most serious of all in Dr. Naveh's decipherment, however, is the reading *waw* for a sign quite unlike *waw*, but virtually identical with late, Palaeo-Hebrew *qof*. Hence both *mwryh* and *nwh* disappear. The key to the decipherment, I believe, is in recognizing repetition of the sequence *nqh yh*. We should read:

<sup>12a</sup>nqh yh 'l hñn.<sup>12,14,15</sup> nqh<sup>16</sup> yh yhw'h

Absolve (us) O<sup>17</sup> merciful God!

Absolve (us) O Yahweh!

## 3. Inscription C (South Wall)

Naveh correctly reads this short inscription, written, we believe, by the scribe of Inscriptions A and B.

hwš'is [y]lhw'h

Deliver (us) O Lord

It is evident that Inscription C and Inscription B are closely related in character, and both, indeed, are in context with Inscription A.

## II

The script of the Cave Inscriptions is a characteristic vulgar semiformal hand closely related to the script of the Gibeon jar-handles of the sixth

century BC, and not far separated from the archetype of the Palaeo-Hebrew scripts of the fourth to the second centuries BC.

'*Alef* is a developed form of the cursive '*alef* first identified by Professor N. Avigad. As we have shown elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> this '*alef* flourishes in the interval between the early eighth and the sixth centuries. The developed (or degenerate) type of this '*alef* found in our inscriptions is latest in the series, comparable to the Gibeon type of the sixth century BC.

*Hê* has a relatively long leg, a secondary lengthening clearly, and a tendency for the horizontals, especially the lower two, to narrow toward a point, giving a triangular effect. This tendency reaches its climax in post-Exilic Palaeo-Hebrew scripts. The Beit Lei form can scarcely be earlier than the sixth century BC.

*Waw* evolves little between the late eighth century BC and the sixth. The form of the *waw* in these inscriptions is developed, having a short leg.

*Yod* is broad and squat, a form typical of the late seventh and sixth centuries, persisting into the Palaeo-Hebrew of the fourth century BC.

*Kaf* is most interesting. The lower arm has moved away from the right vertical, meeting the upper arm quite close to its tip. This is quite different from the seventh-sixth century cursive in which the upper arm moved leftward away from the vertical (in the manner of Aramaic *kaf*). The form of Inscription A, however, is the prototype of the Palaeo-Hebrew *kaf* of certain of the Maccabaeen coin scripts, and survives in more developed form at Qumran (e.g., IQ palaeo-Lev.). A similar form of *kaf* is used in Phoenician beginning as early as the eighth century BC and appearing sporadically in the seventh and sixth centuries. There is no reason to think, however, that Palaeo-Hebrew took over a Phoenician style.<sup>20</sup>

*Lamed* in our texts reveals the "L" form which developed first in the seventh century BC.<sup>21</sup> It persists into the sixth century and survives in the Palaeo-Hebrew scripts.

*Mêm* in the word *Jerusalem* has a sharply reduced shoulder, a trait which marks forms of the seventh century and later.<sup>22</sup>

The single, obscure '*ayin* appears to be triangular, a form frequent in the sixth century and in the post-Exilic Palaeo-Hebrew scripts.<sup>23</sup>

We have referred above to the late, cursive form of *qof* which has been confused with *waw*. It is a regular Palaeo-Hebrew form. The greatly elongated leg, like the lengthened leg of *daleth* and *he*, is a late element.

Of the remaining letters, none requires comment. Typologically, they are without great interest, their forms evolving slowly over our period.

Šin does not show the rounding at the bottom of its double "y" which marks the latest pre-Exilic cursive and the Palaeo-Hebrew scripts.

To summarize: the Cave Inscriptions have a number of features characteristic of the sixth-century Hebrew script and a few otherwise found only in the Palaeo-Hebrew script of the fourth to first centuries BC. It dates from no earlier than the sixth century BC; certain letters, notably *'alef*, *dalet*, *waw*, *mēm*, *šade* and *šin* are probably no later than the sixth century BC.<sup>24</sup> In conclusion, the Beit Lei inscriptions A-C are safely dated to the sixth century BC.

### III

These three inscriptions obviously are not ordinary tomb inscriptions. Indeed their content is such that I believe we can assert positively that they are not funerary inscriptions and have no reference to the dead.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the drawings in the cave, human figures and ships, and what we can best label as "doodling" are inappropriate tomb decorations and hardly come from the hand of mourners or near kin of the deceased. If we add to this the singular absence of pottery dating from the age of the tomb, and note that Persian pottery was found in the tomb shaft, we are led to the conclusion that the tomb was opened (and robbed presumably) in antiquity. We are inclined, therefore, to attribute the inscriptions and sketches to chance visitors, or to refugees or travelers who took shelter in the cave.

One inscription is a petition for deliverance; another a plea to be spared from guilt or punishment. The third (A) takes the form of a prophetic oracle in which Yahweh speaks in the first person, and in poetic form. The couplet affirms God's acceptance and redemption of Jerusalem and Judah in language reminiscent of Jeremiah and Second Isaiah. It is very difficult to avoid the speculation that Inscription A is the citation of a lost prophecy, and that it and its companion inscriptions were written by a refugee fleeing the Chaldeans who conquered Judah and destroyed the holy city in 587 BC. Most documents, especially manuscripts and papyri, found in Palestinian caves were left behind by men in such circumstances. The same may be true of these graffiti. Perhaps such speculations are built on too flimsy a foundation of facts; at all events we shall suppress the temptation to suggest that the oracle and the petitions may have been the work of a prophet or his amanuensis fleeing Jerusalem.

### FOOTNOTES

1. J. Naveh, "Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave," *IEJ*, 13 (1963), pp. 74-96. The site of the cave is at map co-ordinates 1437×1078 on the 1:100,000 map.
2. Through the kindness of Dr. Naveh the writer was able to study the inscriptions in various lightings in 1964, and to prepare drawings and tracings checked against the original (see fig. 1).
3. See Cross and Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography* (1952), Chapter IV, esp. pp. 46 f. It has become increasingly clear that the Judean 3 masc. sing. pronominal suffix was originally *-š* (derived from *-šhu*). We also can state with confidence that the *-w* of *ywhw* of the Gezer Calendar stands for *-šw* (*yaršhw*) the articular suffix added to a plural or dual noun. Professor Dean McBride and the writer plan a more detailed study of the articular (or deictic) suffix in Hebrew and Phoenician. A recent example of the former is *byth 'yšb* "the house of 'Elyāšb," in the 'Arad Letter published by Y. Aharoni, *BASOR*, No. 184 (1966), pp. 14 f. For Phoenician examples, see Donner-Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, II (1964), pp. 20 f. and the literature cited. On the usage *wršhw* (Sabaeen) or *wršw* (Minaeen) before month names in South Arabic, see provisionally S. Smith, *VT*, 2 (1952), p. 287.
4. Only the top of *yod* is visible on the stone (see fig. 1), and a trace of the bottom of *nūn* or perhaps *kaf* (in which case read *'ānōkī*). It is clear, however, from the margin and the traces that several letters are missing.
5. Following the head of *yod* is a word-divider before the lower left arm of the letter.
6. Following *hē* is a clear word-divider below the lower left arm of the letter.
7. The traces of *'ayin* show a typical triangular form of sixth-century style. Cf. F. M. Cross, "... The Inscribed Jar Handles from Gibeon," *BASOR*, No. 168 (1962), p. 22.
8. The two lower strokes of the head of *hē* form a triangle, a characteristic sixth-century form. Only a trace of the upper stroke is extant. The right downstroke is faint but clear enough. Apparently the following word-divider is missing.
9. In the space between a clear *waw* and a clear *'alef*, there is ample room for a letter. Part of a vertical slanting down to the right appears on the stone, and a trace of a horizontal. The faint lines fit well with a late *gimel*.
10. As noted in n. 4, *'ānōkī* is a possible but much less likely reading. *'ānī* used of the deity is frequent in sixth-century prophecy, especially in Ezekiel. Cf. also such phrases as *'ny 'l* in Isa 43:12 and 45:22.
11. Note the writing of the pronominal suffix: *-kh*. This is, of course, the expected writing of the literary form *-kā* (versus the vulgar form *-k, -ak*). See *Early Hebrew Orthography*, p. 43, and excursus, pp. 65 ff.
12. For example, Isa. 44:26: *h'mir tywšlm twšb w'ry yhwdh tbyrnh*. One may also compare the pairs *'ry yhwdh / 'yšby / 'yš yrlm* especially in Jeremiah (11:12; 6:8; etc.). Cf. also Isa. 5:3.
- 12a. Naveh reads *mēm*. However, the broad shoulder is very strange, fitting better certain broad-headed *nūns* (Gibeon Jar-handles). Happily, the sequence *ngh yh* in the second part of the line permits us to read *nūn*. Apparently the scribe made the

first movement of the head of *nūn*, then, after lifting his stylus, completed a rather broad-headed form.

13. A clear *lamed* is written below what appears to be the false start of *hē*, the following letter of *'lhm*.

14. We should read *hēt*, not *hē*, although *hēt* does not have the top horizontal break through to the right normally as does *hē*, nor is the triangular head characteristic of *hēt* as it is of *hā*.

15. The head of *nūn* may be doubly ticked and read *mēm*. The alternate is to read *'lhm*, "God." Note that a word divider stands after *nūn*.

16. On this meaning of *ngy* in the piel, cf. Psalm 19:3, Joel 4:21, etc. The sense can as easily be "spare from punishment"; cf. Jer 30:11; 46:28 etc.

17. *yh* is to be taken probably as the particle of entreaty known in Ugaritic, in Aramaic, and in New Hebrew (as well as in Arabic). In Ahiqar 127, 129, it is written *yh* as is expected in the orthography of this period. Evidently the particle is dialectal in Canaanite. Cf. in Ugaritic *ya 'il-mi*, "O El!" In classical Hebrew it may be hidden behind the late, short form of the Divine name *yah*, e.g., in such a context as Psalm 130:3.

18. This is the expected spelling; the *waw* represents the diphthong: *hawšā*. Cf. *Early Hebrew Orthography*, p. 53.

19. "Epigraphical Notes on Hebrew Documents of the Eighth-Sixth Centuries B.C.: III. The Inscribed Jar Handles from Gibeon" [hereafter *EN III*], *BASOR*, No. 168 (1962), pp. 18 f.

20. Attempts to show mixing of script styles (after the final separation of Hebrew and Aramaic scripts from their Phoenician ancestral script) have regularly failed as more data have accumulated. Methodologically, resort to explanation of letter forms by "borrowings" from neighboring national scripts may be used only after all other explanations have been exhausted, and even then remain dubious.

21. See the discussion in "Epigraphic Notes on Hebrew Documents of the Eighth-Sixth Centuries BC: II. The Murabba'at Papyrus and the Letter found Near Yabneh-Yam" (hereafter *EN II*), *BASOR*, No. 165 (1962), p. 40, and *EN III*, pp. 21 f.

22. Cf. *EN II*, p. 40; *EN III*, p. 22.

23. The *'ayin* of Yabneh-yam anticipates the triangular form. Cf. *EN II*, p. 40.

24. It should be noted that the fifth century is a blank in the history of the Hebrew scripts. I am inclined to date a few seals to this period, but no certainly fixed material is extant. We presume that Palaeo-Hebrew (as distinct from the old Hebrew script) arose in the fifth century. Seals of fixed date, coins, jar stamps, and manuscripts now fill out the Palaeo-Hebrew series from the fourth century BC to the Age of Bar Kokhba.

25. The curse formulae in the tomb are probably older, and may be funerary imprecations.