

Research on Israel and Aram

Autonomy, Independence and Related Issues

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Research on Israel and Aram in Biblical Times I

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Divination Texts from Maresha

ESTHER ESHEL and IAN STERN

Abstract: More than a century of excavations at Maresha have yielded tremendously exciting and varied finds including more than twelve-hundred Greek and Aramaic inscriptions and ostraca. The quantity and diversity of these finds place Maresha among the most significant and enriching ancient archeological sites in Israel. The Southern foothill site has yielded more than 1,200 Greek and Semitic – mainly Aramaic – inscriptions dated to the Hellenistic period. 420 are from Subterranean Complex 169, a cave complex that contains anthropogenic debris dumped from surface dwellings during the Hellenistic period and, therefore, lacks a clear stratigraphic sequence. Included in this collection are a group of 160 Aramaic ostraca, dating to the third or second centuries BCE. They share a similar textual structure, including the phrase “either/or from the gods/Qōs,” along with two or more elements starting with the word 𐤓𐤓. Based on our study of the content of this group of 𐤓𐤓 texts, we suggest the ostraca may be understood as divination texts. In this paper we will present the 𐤓𐤓 group and will focus on the largest ostrakon where marital status makes up the majority of its text.

1. History and Archaeological Excavations

There are several biblical and postbiblical references to Maresha as a city in ancient Judah.¹ The archaeological record clearly reflects an Iron Age II presence.² Following the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 BCE and the subsequent conquest of Edom by Nabonidus in 552 BCE, there was a migration of Edomites and other ethnic groups into Southern Judah. Little archaeological evidence from the sixth-fifth centuries survives, but there are material finds from the fourth century BCE.³ Moving on, the status of Maresha during the Persian period is unclear. By the third century BCE, it appears that a Hellenized Sidonian community settled in Maresha.⁴ The city's close commercial ties with the Ptolemies during the third century BCE is evident in the Zenon Papyri (259 BCE; P. Cairo Zen. 1 59006, col. III, Line 64a; 59015, Verso, Line 16).⁵ In around 198

¹ Josh 15:44; 2 Chr 2:7–9; Mic 1:13–15; Josephus, *Ant.* 8, 246; Eusebius 682/130:10; NOTLEY/SAF-RAI, Eusebius, 124.

² BLISS/MACALISTER, *Excavations*, 58; KLONER, *Final Report I*, 9–16.

³ ESHEL, *Inscriptions in Hebrew*, 38.

⁴ PETERS/THIERSCH, *Painted Tombs*, 36–39.

⁵ EDGAR, *Catalogue général*, 13, 35.

BCE the city came under Seleucid control and the process of Hellenization intensified. During the Hasmonean wars, Maresha was used by Seleucid army as a base for attacks against Judea and the Maccabees retaliated strongly.⁶ Following its conquest and destruction by John Hyrcanus in 107 BCE, the city is believed to have been either abandoned or transferred to a different location.⁷

Maresha was first excavated in 1900 by Bliss and Macalister, who discovered a planned and fortified Hellenistic city encircled by a town wall with towers. They identified two Hellenistic and one Israelite strata in the mound. Many of the ancient city's olive presses, columbaria and cisterns can still be seen. Large-scale excavations of surface areas and some of the subterranean complexes were directed by Amos Kloner, under the auspices of the Israel Antiquity Authorities, from 1989 to 2000. The results of the rich finds were originally published in three volumes and more are being prepared for publication.⁸ Already published are a hundred Aramaic ostraca and inscriptions, among them is the famous Edomite marriage contract.⁹ We are very grateful to Amos for his scholarly generosity.

2. The Ostraca

Since 2000, Ian Stern and Bernie Alpert have conducted further excavations.¹⁰ This Southern foothill site has yielded more than 1200 Greek and Semitic – many in Aramaic – inscriptions, dated to the Hellenistic period. 420 are from Subterranean Complex 169, a cave complex that contains unstratified anthropogenic debris that was dumped from surface dwellings during the Hellenistic period. Included in this collection are a group of 160 Aramaic ostraca dating to the third or second centuries BCE. These inscriptions share a similar textual structure, characterized by two main elements:

1. The sentences begin with the Aramaic word והן or והן . In previous work we translated this word as: – “(and) if P,” sometimes, “(and) if not.” After further study, we have accepted Theodor Kwasman suggestion and we now prefer to translate all the והן as: “either... or,” while ללא הן might be interpreted as: “alternatively.”

2. In these ostraca the formula הן מן אלהין often appears and may be translated as: “either/or it is from the gods/Elahin.”

At the beginning of our work, we could not determine the identity of the inscriptions' writers because we could not recognize any personal names that would hint at nationality or religion. We could only suppose that the writers were not Jews. From previous experience with the inscriptions from Idumea, we have learned that the clear majority do not contain Jewish or Yahwistic theophoric names. The epigraphic material from late

⁶ 2 Macc 12:35.

⁷ While Josephus, in *Ant.* 14.4.4 §75, JW 1.7.7 §156, attests to a post-Hyrcanus Maresha, no archaeological evidence of such a city has been found to date aside from a number of surface coins.

⁸ KLONER, Final Report I; KLONER et al., Final Report III; EHRLICH/KLONER, Final Report II.

⁹ ESHEL/KLONER, Aramaic Ostraca; ESHEL/PUECH/KLONER, Aramaic Scribal Exercises; ESHEL, Inscriptions in Hebrew; Aramaic Texts from Qumran; Iron Age.

¹⁰ STERN/ALPERT, Subterranean Complex 169.

Persian period Idumea represents a very mixed ethnic population of primarily Idumeans, Arabs and Phoenicians. This conclusion can be supported further using the word **אלהין**, “the gods,” which occurs here in plural, rather than the singular as would be expected from supposedly monotheistic Jews. However, this problem has been resolved at least partially because we found the phrase **הן מן קוס**, “either/or it is Qōs” written on some ostraca from this collection. Qōs is a reference to the god of the Idumeans. Lately, we were able to read also: **הן מן בעל אדיר** “either from Mighty Baal.”

Of the 160 **הן** inscriptions, most are fragmentary with only a few complete or almost complete. The pottery sherds that were chosen by the scribes were not always the most durable writing media. At least one inscription was written on the upper part of a jar, including the rim. In another instance, the letters were inscribed on a fragment of a bowl, extending over the black stripe that decorated its upper part. In some cases, several inscriptions were written in scattered columns across a single bowl.

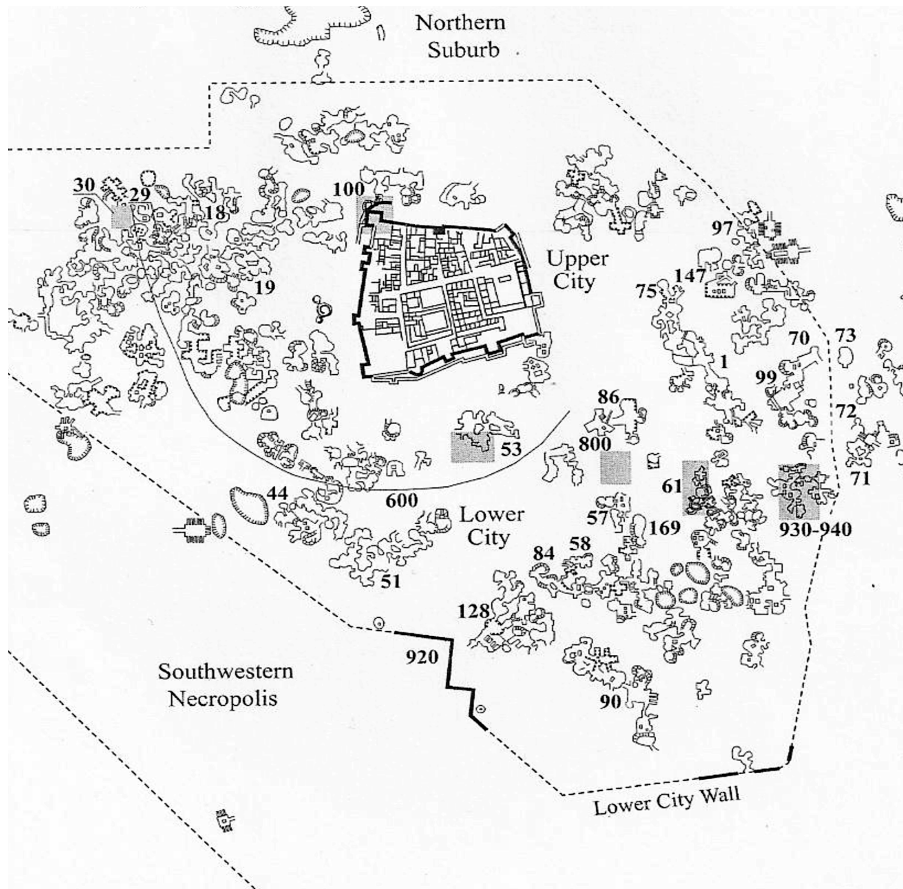


Figure 1: General plan of the subterranean complexes at Maresha.

3. The Nature and Context of the ‘𐤊𐤍 Texts’

The group of the ‘𐤊𐤍 texts’ from Maresha is a very distinctive, yet at the same time, a very peculiar cluster of ostraca. Scholarly attempts to read the texts encounter many problems, from syntactic challenges to problematic individual words. However, examining the texts as a group rather than as individual pieces may assist us in understanding the purpose and function of the inscriptions. Based on the phrase “either/or from the gods/ Elahin/ Qōs,” along with the characteristic structure of two or more elements starting with the word 𐤊𐤍, thus creating a list of “either ...or...”, sometimes with 𐤋𐤊 𐤊𐤍, “alternatively,” along with their content, the ostraca may be understood as *divination texts*. In order to substantiate this interpretation, we considered a possible parallel to texts of the Mesopotamian world, where the most common written attestations for divination are conditional omens. Although there are some general similarities between the ‘𐤊𐤍 texts’ from Maresha and the Akkadian omen texts, unfortunately, the comparative analysis is not easy to support. While the Mesopotamian omens have a clear structure because the protasis and the apodosis are usually complete, the meaning of the Maresha texts is much vaguer. In many cases, one of the elements that sets up the condition is missing. The sentences themselves are short and sometimes lack a verb. The Maresha inscriptions, written with ink on recycled pottery sherds, are probably not canonical omen texts as the Mesopotamian omens are. It would seem more likely that the Maresha ostraca document short versions of local oracles which we suppose were used during some sort of divination ceremony at the site.

However, we can also present an alternative explanation by returning to the first interpretation we have suggested of the parallel texts found nearby, in Area 61, as scribal exercises. Here, in Subterranean Complex 169 they might be interpreted as ostraca used for the training of diviners. As they are written in short sentences and are incomplete, they appear more similar to notations than complete copies of texts.

The presumption of divination activity in Maresha may find substantiation from the archaeological site, Subterranean Complex 169 (fig. 1). The finds there include more than 385 aniconic *kernos* lamps attached to vessels similar to those used in various rituals in the Hellenistic world (50% of the total number of lamps found in SC 169), which based on its study by Ambar, the main function of these kernoi was something other than merely illumination; 17 models of chalk *phalli* which appear to have been cultic in nature, either connected to fertility rites or perhaps used as votive objects (fig. 2); and 63 modified *astragaloi* (knucklebones; out of a total of 361 found in this area). As pointed out to us by Geller, these knucklebones may very well have been used for divination. Most of them came from ovine bones, others from bovine bones, while some are models made of lead or glass. Some bear the Greek inscription νίκη “victory.” The mention of victory suggests a use for game or divination (LSJ: 1176), but νίκη may also refer to the eponymous goddess. In the Greek and Roman cultures some *astragaloi* were associated with luck and were used as game pieces in games of chance, while others were used in divination rituals. The rich cultic assemblage found in Subterranean Complex 169 has been connected to a monumental building approximately 30 meters away

in Area 800, that Amos Kloner and Nili Graicer identified as a shrine.¹¹ Subterranean Complex 169 is only ca. 10 meters from Subterranean Complex 57, where the famous ‘Heliodorus Stele’ was discovered. It concerns the Seleucid king Seleucus IV’s appointment of a certain Olympiodoros to a position of religious responsibility in Koile, Syria and Phoenicia. The consensus of scholarly opinion is that the ‘Heliodorus Stele’ once stood near or inside a temple.¹²

Up to this point we have been able to define the following subjects in this הן collection: a. Sickness and Disease, such as: והן מותא והן מחלא, “And either death or illness”; b. Demons, referred to in general as: רוחא and אותקא¹³ – used in Akkadian texts as a generic name, *utukku(m)*,¹⁴ as well as לילת; c. Astronomical Events, such as the Comet Halley; d. Various Family Issues, such as marriage and divorce. All these issues are part of general daily life in the ancient world.



Figure 2: Models of phalli from chalk from Maresha.

¹¹ GRAICER, Urban Planning, 183–1931; KLONER, Economy.

¹² In 2007, Hannah Cotton and Michael Würle published the first fragments (A+B) of an inscription, found in a private collection. In 2009 three more fragments (C, D, E) of the same inscription found in Maresha were published. For the preliminary report see STERN, Maresha Inscriptions, 60–61. The inscription was studied by GERA, Olympiodoros, 125–155; JONES, Inscription, 100–104.

¹³ See ESHEL, Aramaic Texts from Qumran, 181–186.

¹⁴ BLACK/GEORGE/POSTGATE, Concise Dictionary, 430.

4. The Largest Ostrakon of the יהן Texts

Now we would like to take a closer look at the largest ostrakon found in the collection. The ostrakon, measuring 15.5 cm in height and 11 cm in width, bears 18 lines. The inscription seems to be almost complete, except for the beginning of line 1, and 2–3 letters in line 2. It is written on both sides: Side A includes 16 written lines, and Side B has only two lines – written by two additional scribes. There is a clear difference in the script on the two sides. The script can be dated to the second century BCE, with some archaic letter of the 4th century BCE.

The study of this inscription, like many other of this collection, was first done jointly with Rivka Elitzur-Leiman and later with Mark Geller, Theodore Kwasman, and Michael Langlois; Michael is also responsible for having taken the best photos of the ostraca and now prepares the corpus for publication with me.¹⁵

Some of the readings are tentative and there are several uncertain interpretations. The text includes many subjects, some written in short enigmatic sentences. We can clearly define the following topics:

- A. Settlements and buildings
- B. Marital status
- C. Economic transactions

Issues of marital status make up the major part of this ostrakon, lines 5–12, in contrast to most of the other ostraca that move line by line to different topics. Given the opportunity to focus on connected material, we have decided to dedicate most of our attention to this content. Following are some readings and short discussions:

A. Line 5 reads as follows:

הן מחטף יחטף אנתתא והן מקח

“Either he elopes with a woman or acquires (probably: in marriage).”

In Hebrew and Aramaic, the verb חטף means ‘to take away,’ usually by violence, see Ps 10:9 יִצָּרֵב לְחַטּוֹף עָנִי. The noun חטפא in Aramaic also means ‘violence,’ for example, Targum to Isaiah 60:18 לֹא יִשְׁתַּמֵּעַ עוֹד חֲטָפָא - לֹא יִשְׁמַע עוֹד חָמָס בְּאַרְצֶךָ (see Ezek 45:9).

Marriage by kidnapping is first known from the biblical story of the Outrage of Gibeah (Judg 19–21). After the Battle of Gibeah, the men of Israel had sworn an oath at Mizpah, saying, “None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife.” Later the plan for the survival of this tribe without women unfolds:

וְרָאִיתֶם, וְהִנֵּה אִם-יֵצְאוּ בְנוֹת-שִׁלּוֹ לְחוּל בְּמַחְלוֹת וַיֵּצְאֵתֶם מִן-הַכְּרָמִים וְחִטְפֹתֶם לָכֶם אִישׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ
מִבְּנוֹת שִׁלּוֹ וְהִלַּכְתֶּם אֶרֶץ בְּנֵימִן. (Judg 21:21)

Abduction marriage, or marriage by forced eloping is discussed later in *Tosephta Ketubbot* 4:9:

¹⁵ I would also like to thank Ada Yardeni and Shaul Shaked for their assistance with our first steps of this ostrakon and some others.

כשהיו בני אלכסנדריא מקדשין נשים. אחר בא וחוטפה מן השוק

Adiel Shremer, noted the same practice was also known among non-Jews in the region.¹⁶

והן מקח – in this context מקח probably comes from לקח, which sometimes means ‘to take in marriage,’ for example, in the marriage contract found at Elephantine, we read: “Moreover, [Ananiah shall] n[ot be able to] take anothe[r] woman [besides Jehoishma].”

What we see here are two options for marriage. The first, marriage by forced eloping, has been known for centuries from various sources on other communities. This practice was sometimes implemented as a means of resolving issues within or between families rather than arbitrarily imposed against the woman’s will. The second option, marriage by acquiring, is the more common act among all ethnicities.

B. Line 6 reads as follows:

הן בקשת גברא ממלל עמה והן לא

It is not clear whether these lines serve as the continuation of line 5, or rather move to a new subject, still related to the issue of male-female relations but proceed to the period during their marriage – or maybe toward ending the marriage. The first part can tentatively be translated as follows: “Either the man speaks with her truthfully, or alternatively,” namely, that he does not speak truthfully.

Interestingly, such a directive for honesty is raised in another context of about the same period, that is in the Genesis Apocryphon from Cave One at Qumran, an Aramaic retelling of the cycles of Enoch, Noah and Abraham. Although one should not mix literature with juridical texts, some scholars noted the juridical background for some of the terminology in the Genesis Apocryphon, so we would carefully suggest looking at the following parallel. In the Enoch cycle, in column 2, we come to the middle of a hot debate between Lamech and his wife Bitenosh regarding the fatherhood of Noah. His miraculous birth, not preserved in this scroll but known from 1 Enoch 106–107, raises the suspicion that Noah’s father was one of the Watchers who descended to earth and met with “the daughter of men,” found in Genesis 6:1–4 and elaborated upon in the Book of Watchers. In that scene, Lamech asks Bitenosh to speak truthfully:

עד כולא בקושט תחויני... [בקושטא] תחויני ולא בכדבין

“... until you recount truthfully everything for me, without lies” (2:5–6).¹⁷

C. Moving to the second part, line 10:

הן באיש עלון מן גברא

“Either the man despises (=has something bad) upon her.”¹⁸

After some unclear lines – thus it is difficult to know if these lines are a continuation of the former ones – the text move to deal with divorce. This interpretation is based upon

¹⁶ SCHREMER, *Male and Female*, 116–117, esp. notes 43–44.

¹⁷ MACHIELA, *Genesis Apocryphon*, 35.

¹⁸ עלון is probably a mistake for עלה, ‘upon her’.

the known terminology regarding a man who “has something bad,” that is, ‘despises’ his wife. Such terminology is known from the biblical law of Deuteronomy 24:1:

כִּי־יִקַּח אִישׁ אִשָּׁה. וּבִעֻלָּהּ: וְהָיָה אִם־לֹא תִמְצָא־חֵן בְּעֵינָיו. כִּי־מָצָא בָּהּ עֲרֻת דָּבָר וְכָתַב לָהּ סֵפֶר
כְּרִיתֻת וְנָתַן בְּיָדָהּ. וְשָׁלְחָהּ מִבֵּיתוֹ

“Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house.”

5. Summary

The 160 ostraca in Aramaic from Maresha are mostly fragmentary and are difficult to read. However, in some cases, we are fortunate to have some clear and complete lines or even almost complete – like the one we have discussed. We have suggested interpreting this collection as divination texts, probably originally part of a collection from a nearby shrine or perhaps from other cultic items nearby. We have also raised the possibility, that this collection was part of scribal exercises with divination texts possibly related to a school for practitioners.

We have discussed some issues raised by the largest ostrakon from Maresha, looking at the various references to marital issues. We looked at two types of marriages – marriage by forced eloping and bride acquisition. We then moved on to look at different aspects of the relations between a man and a woman on the issue of truthfulness in their interactions. Finally, we looked at a case of a divorce.

In considering the entire collection of ostraca found, we have not yet discovered an association with any ethnic group living at Maresha, apart for a few cases where it mentions the Edomite god Qōs. The topics we read from the ostraca pertain to general daily life in the ancient world, interpreted as predicting the future or revealing the will of the gods.

We continue to work text by text, looking forward to the time when all the texts are fully deciphered and interpreted. At that time, we will be able to better understand the content and context of these fascinating ostraca from Hellenistic Maresha.

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