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Baruch the Scribe and Jerahmeel the King's Son

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# Baruch the Scribe and Jerahmeel the King's Son

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AMONG the hundreds of Hebrew seals and seal-impressions dating from biblical times known up to now, not one of their owners can be identified with absolute certainty with a person mentioned in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the entire corpus of Hebrew inscriptions and ostraca has not yielded the name of a person who can be pinpointed without hesitation as occurring in a biblical text.

This phenomenon is the more striking since the extant epigraphic material contains many personal names, and the historical books of the Bible contain a large and variegated gallery of figures. However, the Hebrew epigraphic material is still quite meagre, and the hope remained that with the growth of this material the prospects of correlation of individuals between the two sources would also increase. Such a correlation has finally emerged. Two seal-impressions which were recently found together with other impressions contain names and titles which can be identified with absolute certainty with two persons who appear in the same biblical narrative.

These two bullae belong to a large group of inscribed seal-impressions from the First Temple period which were found at an as yet unknown place in Judah.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of the impressions bear only personal names, but on a number of them the titles of high-ranking officials also appear. One of these, bearing the inscription שר העיר, 'Governor of the City', has recently been published.<sup>3</sup> In due time the hoard will be published in full.

The bullae are made of clay, and were used for sealing rolled papyrus documents which were tied with a string; on their back can be seen the imprints of the papyrus and the string. The clay was hardened by the fire which consumed the papyri. The documents to which these bullae were affixed in all likelihood belonged to an official archive.

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<sup>1</sup> On several seals and sealings belonging to royal officials the names of the kings they served appear (Jeroboam, Uzziah, Ahaz and Hezekiah). The kings are known but not the officials. Even the generally accepted identification of Gedaliah son of Ahikam with 'Gedaliah, who is over the house', found on a bulla from Lachish, is not absolutely certain.

<sup>2</sup> For the discovery of another group of inscribed bullae from the Persian period, see N. Avigad: *Bullae and Seals from a Post-exilic Judean Archive (Qedem 4)*, Jerusalem, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> N. Avigad: The Governor of the City, *IEJ* 26 (1976), pp. 178–182.

THE BULLA OF BARUCH BEN NERIAH, THE SCRIBE<sup>4</sup>

This bulla (Pl. 15:B), measuring  $17 \times 16$  mm., is stamped with an oval seal,  $11 \times 13$  mm. It has a single border line and is divided by horizontal double lines into three registers, all of which are inscribed.

לברכיהו	<i>Belonging to Berechiah</i>
בן נריהו	<i>son of Neriah</i>
הספר	<i>the scribe</i>

The script is the formal-cursive Hebrew of the seventh century B.C. The *samekh* in the bottom line has the typical cursive 'tick' in the lower horizontal stroke. The unusual gap between the first two letters in the second line may have been caused by a defect in the stone of the seal.

הספר is the defective spelling of הסופר, 'the scribe'. This appellation appears on several seals.<sup>5</sup> Some of the scribes mentioned in the Bible occupied important positions at the royal court. Shebna the scribe, Shaphan the scribe and others were the kings' private secretaries and also ministers in the royal council.

Another well-known holder of this title was Baruch ben Neriah, the scribe (Jer. 36:4 and passim), and it is with this person that the owner of our bulla is to be identified. His full name appears to have been בִּרְכִיָּהוּ, Berechiah, as on the impression, a fact which was unknown before, but the biblical accounts use the hypocoristicon ברוך Baruch. For the sake of convenience we shall use Baruch throughout the following discussion. In the Bible the name of Baruch's father is rendered as either נריהו or נריה.

THE BULLA OF JERAHMEEL, THE KING'S SON<sup>6</sup>

This bulla (Pl. 15:C) measures  $12 \times 10$  mm. The oval border-line was slightly deformed at the upper left by pressure during the sealing. It has a two-line inscription divided by a double line.

לירחמאל	<i>Belonging to Jerahmeel</i>
בן המלך	<i>the king's son</i>

יִרְחָמֵאל, the owner of this sealing, is to be identified with Jerahmeel the king's son, who is mentioned in Jer. 36:26. The expression בן המלך, 'the king's son', also occurs

<sup>4</sup> This bulla is in the Israel Museum, the gift of Dr. R. Hecht, to whom I am obliged for permission to publish it.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Avigad, *op. cit.* (above, n. 2), pp. 7–8 and n. 6. For other recent publications of הספר inscriptions, see P. Bordreuil: *Inscriptions sigillaires ouest sémitiques II: Un cachet hébreu récemment acquis par le Cabinet de médailles de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, *Syria* 52 (1975), pp. 107–118; A. Lemaire: *Essai sur cinq sceaux phéniciens*, *Semitica* 27 (1977), pp. 30–40, No. 4. For a general treatment, see T.N.D. Mettingen: *Solomonic State Officials*, Lund, 1971, pp. 25–51.

<sup>6</sup> My thanks are due to Mr. J. Sasson for permission to publish this bulla.

elsewhere in the Bible,<sup>7</sup> and has also been found on a number of seals and seal impressions.<sup>8</sup> For its meaning, see below.

The search for the identity of our two seal-owners leads us to Chapter 36 of the book of Jeremiah, one of the most noteworthy chapters of the book, in which appears *Baruch ben Neriah the scribe*, secretary and devoted friend of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 36:4). In the fourth year of Jehoiakim king of Judah (605/604 B.C.) Baruch wrote down from dictation a scroll containing the prophecies of Jeremiah which included also the predictions concerning the downfall of Judah and Jerusalem. Some time later, on a fast day during Jehoiakim's fifth year, Baruch read these prophecies publicly in the Temple, and afterwards before some of the king's ministers. The scroll was brought to the attention of King Jehoiakim who became enraged and had it burnt, and ordered the seizure of the prophet and the scribe. This mission was entrusted to *Jerahmeel, the king's son*, and two other officials (Jer. 36:26). Jeremiah and Baruch, however, were warned in time and were able to escape. Jeremiah instructed Baruch to write a new copy of the scroll, adding predictions of severe punishment to the king for destroying the original scroll.

Baruch ben Neriah continued to serve Jeremiah while the latter was kept in confinement by King Zedekiah during the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 32: 13–14). He stood by him faithfully to the very end. After the Babylonian conquest and the assassination of Gedaliah ben Ahikam, the governor of Judah, both he and Jeremiah were taken against their will to Egypt by refugees (Jer. 43:6). These biblical narratives illuminate the personality of Baruch the scribe as an outstanding figure who played an important role in the life and activities of Jeremiah. He is considered by many scholars to be the biographer of the prophet, whose work was actually one of the main sources of the book of Jeremiah.

Information about Jerahmeel the 'son of the king' is meagre. From Jer. 36:26 we learn that he held an office which was connected with police duties such as the detention of dissidents. Two other persons called 'son of the king' are mentioned in the Bible as having performed similar duties: Joash (1 Kings 22:26) and Malchiah (Jer. 38:6). It has been suggested that the title 'son of the king' denotes an office of low rank, probably that of a police officer rather than membership of the royal family.<sup>9</sup>

The present writer has in the past been inconsistent in the interpretation of this title, but he is now inclined to return to his original opinion, that the bearers of the title 'son

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 22:26; 2 Kings 15:5; Jer. 38:6; 2 Chron. 28:7.

<sup>8</sup> For summaries, see N. Avigad: A Seal of 'Manasseh Son of the King', *IEJ* 13 (1963), pp. 133–136; idem, A Group of Hebrew Seals, *EI* 9 (*Albright Volume*) (1969), p. 9 (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> For general treatments, see C. Clermont-Ganneau: *Receuil d'archéologie orientale* 1 (1888), p. 36; R. de Vaux: *Ancient Israel*, New York, 1961, pp. 119–120; S. Yeivin: *Enc. Miqr.*, II, Jerusalem, 1954, col. 160, s.v. *בן המלך*; idem, *Enc. Miqr.*, IV, Jerusalem, 1971, col. 553, s.v. *פסיקידות*; G. Brin: The Title *bn hmlk* and its Parallels, *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 19 (1969), pp. 443–466.

of the king' were indeed members of the royal family.<sup>10</sup> This interpretation finds support in the biblical reference to 'Jotham, the king's son, (who was) over the house, judging the people of the land' (2 Kings 15:5). Here the title is definitely applied to the crown prince who was the son of King Uzziah. In the other cases cited above the bearers of this title probably were among the many princes who were entrusted by kings with various functions, among them also the important office of maintaining security at the royal court. They were high officials of royal descent.

Our present interest lies, of course, in the connection of these two persons, Baruch and Jerahmeel, with their seal-impressions. The two bullae were stamped by their owners in their official capacity, one as a scribe and the other as a royal official. They probably sealed some legal documents or official records which were kept in the archive.

The unique biblical account of the legal procedure in transferring property comes to mind here. In Jer. 32:1–15 we are told how Jeremiah, kept in custody by King Zedekiah, purchased a field from his cousin Hanameel in Anathoth. The contract is drawn up, sealed and signed by the witnesses and the money weighed on scales. The deed is made out in duplicate; one document is sealed (to be opened in case of dispute), and the other open (to be used at will).<sup>11</sup> All was done according to the law and custom. The deed of purchase is entrusted to Baruch ben Neriah ben Mahseiah for safe-keeping in an earthenware jar. We may assume that in accord with the common practice the scribe, who was present at the transaction, was one of the witnesses who signed and sealed the deed. This sealing of Baruch must have been of the same kind as that in our possession.

Our present sealing, however, probably comes from a different document. The fact that it was found together with a number of bullae of royal officials raises the question of the status of Baruch the scribe. Was he a royal scribe or merely the private secretary of the prophet Jeremiah? The latter view is more generally accepted, since Baruch is mentioned only in association with Jeremiah. However, though this is possible, it is not necessarily conclusive. The presence of Baruch's bulla in an archive amidst bullae of royal officers seems to indicate that at some time Baruch belonged to the category of royal scribes, as did his contemporaries Gemariah ben Shaphan the scribe, and Elishama the scribe (Jer. 36:10–12). He is believed to be of noble family and his brother Seraiah was an officer of high rank under Zedekiah (see below). Later, however, Baruch apparently gave up his office to join Jeremiah in his religious and political struggle against the policy of the last kings of Judah, which was to result in the destruction of Jerusalem.

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<sup>10</sup> Avigad, *op. cit.* (above, n. 8, *IEJ* 13), pp. 134–135; see also A.F. Rainey: *Bn hmlk* in Ugarit and among Hittites, *Lešonenu* 33 (1969), pp. 304–308 (Hebrew); idem, The Prince and the Pauper, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 7 (1975), pp. 427–432.

<sup>11</sup> Compare the 'tied deeds' from the second century A.D. found in the Judean Desert; Y. Yadin: The Expedition to the Judean Desert, 1961: Expedition D, *IEJ* 12 (1962), pp. 236–238, Pl. 42:B.

If these conclusions are correct, then Baruch's bulla reached the official archive at a time when the scribe was still active in the king's service, i.e. before he wrote the scroll in 605/604. Jerahmeel's bulla may be contemporary or a few years earlier or later. In any case, the dating of both seal-impressions to the very end of the seventh century B.C. is self-evident.

In conclusion I cannot abstain from expressing my own feelings when handling and deciphering these two bullae for the first time. One has the feeling of personal contact with persons who figure prominently in the dramatic events in which the giant figure of Jeremiah and his faithful follower Baruch were involved at a most critical time preceding the downfall of Judah.

#### ADDENDUM

It seems appropriate to conclude this paper with a note concerning an additional seal of unknown provenance which has been treated in full elsewhere by the author.<sup>12</sup> The seal (Pl. 15:D) bears the inscription לשריהו / בריהו, '*Belonging to Seraiah (ben) Neriah*'. This is the first time that both names in a seal-inscription, that of the owner and his patronymic, are exactly paralleled in a biblical text. It seems highly probable, although not absolutely certain, that the owner of the bulla is the person mentioned in the Bible.

According to our suggestion the owner of the seal, Seraiah (ben) Neriah, should be identified with Seraiah ben Neriah ben Mahseiah, who held the office of a שר מנוחה, 'chief chamberlain', at the court of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah (Jer. 51:59). When the king went to Babylon to pay homage to Nebuchadnezzar, he was accompanied by his minister Seraiah. The prophet Jeremiah entrusted Seraiah with a written oracle announcing the doom of Babylon. On arriving in Babylon, Seraiah was to read this oracle aloud and then tie a stone to the document and throw it into the Euphrates, saying: 'So shall Babylon sink and rise no more' (Jer. 59:64).<sup>13</sup>

Seraiah ben Neriah ben Mahseiah was the brother of Baruch ben Neriah ben Mahseiah (see above), and both were close friends of Jeremiah.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See the forthcoming *EI 14 (Ginsberg Volume)* (1978), pp. 86–87 (in press).

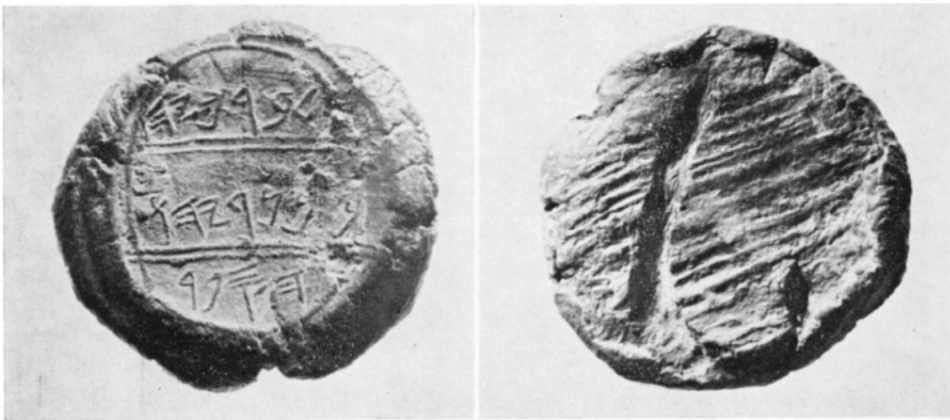
<sup>13</sup> See J. Bright: *Jeremiah (The Anchor Bible)*, Garden City, N.Y., 1965, pp. 176–186, 207–212.

<sup>14</sup> While this paper was in galley-proof the writer came across the essay of J. Muilenburg: Baruch the Scribe, in J.I. Durham and J.R. Porter (eds.): *Proclamation and Presence, Old Testament Essays in Honour of G.H. Davies*, London, 1970, pp. 215–238. Muilenburg presents the view that Baruch the scribe was a royal official (p. 231).

A: 'Ai, Area Z,  
Iron Age settlement  
(courtesy of Dr. R  
Cleave, Pictorial Ar-  
chive, Near Eastern  
History, Jerusalem).



DEVELOPMENT OF TOWN PLANNING IN THE ISRAELITE CITY



B: The bulla of Berechiah, obverse and reverse, scale 3:1.



C: The bulla of Jerahmeel, obverse,  
scale 4:1.



D: The seal of Seraiah, scale 3:1.

BARUCH THE SCRIBE AND JERAHMEEL THE KING'S SON