

AN OSTRACON OF THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES FROM 'IZBET ŞARṬAH

Moshe Kochavi

1. EXCAVATION OF THE SITE

Dominating an isolated spur some 100 m. above sea level and approximately three km. east of Tel Aphek, an Iron Age I settlement was discovered during the Sharon Survey of 1974.¹ The site is called 'Izbet Şarṭah by the Arabs of nearby Kafr Qasim.² Although the archaeological survey of the region has located numerous Israelite settlements on the central ridge and western slopes of the Ephraimite hill country, the nearest settlement to Aphek is 'Izbet Şarṭah (Fig. 1).

Two brief seasons of excavations, directed by the author, were conducted at the site by a joint expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University and the Department of Eretz-Israel Studies of Bar-Ilan University.³ Although the excavations are still in progress, the general archaeological picture is clear: There were three occupational strata at 'Izbet Şarṭah covering the period 1200–1000 B.C.E. The earliest stratum (Stratum III), exposed only to a minor extent, apparently was not significantly

1 Since 1973 the Sharon Valley Archaeological Survey team has been surveying the slopes of the foothills east of Tel Aphek. I. Beit Arieḥ, R. Gophna and the author are in charge of this unit, whose members are graduate students specializing in historical-geography in the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near East Culture at Tel Aviv University. The survey is carried out under the guidelines set down by the Society for the Archaeological Survey of Israel and is integrated with the activities of the society.

2 'Izbeh is the name given to seasonal camps occupied by the villagers of the Samaritan hills who come down every summer to tend to their crops in the Sharon valley; the village of Şarṭah lies about 12 kms. east of the site under excavation.

3 The excavations were carried out in February and August of 1976. The excavators were students of the Department of Eretz Israel studies at Bar-Ilan University and (in August) a group of Jewish youth from the U.S. and Canada. Assisting the author in directing the excavation were: Dr. Moshe Garsiel, Mr. Abraham Shvut and Mr. Israel Finkelstein of Bar-Ilan University; Mr. Joseph Porat from the Department of Antiquities and Museums; Dr. George L. Kelm from the Theological Seminary of New Orleans; Ms. Esther Yadin, Mr. Shlomo Bonimovitz and Mr. David Eitam, advanced students of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University. Ms. Judith Dekel of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University was field surveyor and prepared the maps and plans for this article, while Mr. Moshe Weinberg, of the same institution, was the expedition photographer; the photograph appearing here is credited to him. To all the above the author wishes to express his deepest appreciation.

different from the later strata and consisted of dwellings and adjacent silos; its archaeological remains date it to the 12th century B.C.E. The middle stratum (Stratum II) is the most important: a typically Israelite "four-room house", extending over more than 200 m.², was standing in the centre of the settlement, with smaller buildings at the periphery. The exterior walls of the central building were 1 m. or more in width. In the open space between this building and the surrounding houses, dozens of circular

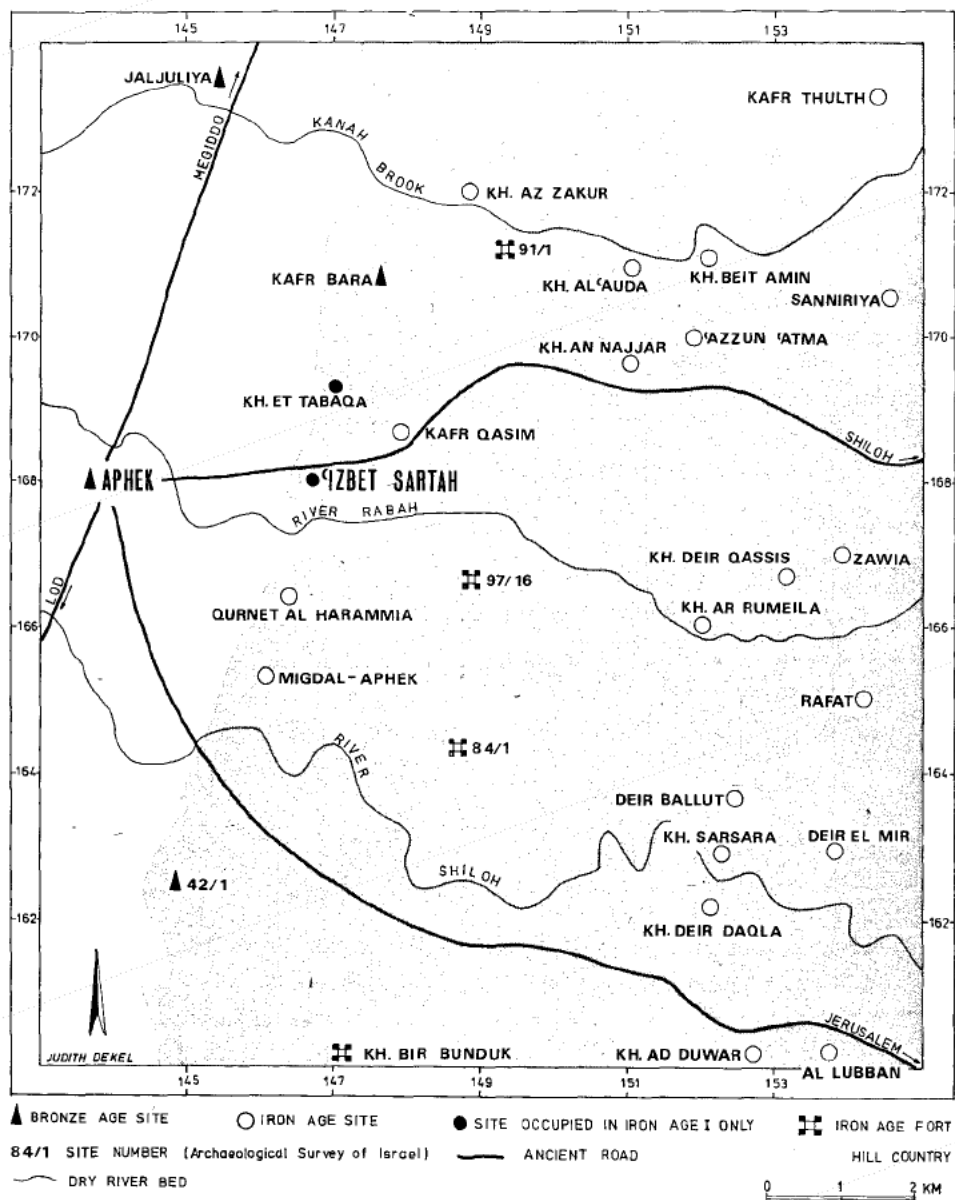


Fig. 1. Survey map of Aphek region.

stone-lined silos, dug down to bedrock, were discovered (Fig. 2). The four-room house had been built on the ruins of Stratum III, and after a short period of abandonment at the end of Stratum II it was rebuilt by the people of Stratum I. The finds of Stratum II date its abandonment to the middle of the 11th century and the renewed settlement of the upper stratum (Stratum I), of very short duration, to around the end of the 11th or beginning of the 10th century B.C.E.

2. HISTORY AND IDENTIFICATION OF THE SITE

Identification of 'Izbet Şarṭah as an Israelite site of the settlement period and the period of the Judges is not open to question. Its general nature as a small, unfortified settlement, situated on a barren hillside opposite Philistine Aphek, the four-room house, typically Israelite in its layout, and the characteristic silos and "collared-rim" pithoi found in the excavations all support this conclusion.

As the nearest Israelite neighbour of Aphek, lying on the road leading up to Shiloh, the site is ideally located as the mustering centre of Eben-ezer for the Israelite forces who went forth to battle the Philistine armies assembling at Aphek (1 Sam. 4). The founders were very likely Ephraimite families who pushed westwards to the edge of the hill country and settled the site in the 12th century B.C.E., not daring to move down into the Yarkon basin through fear of the Canaanites and later the Philistines,

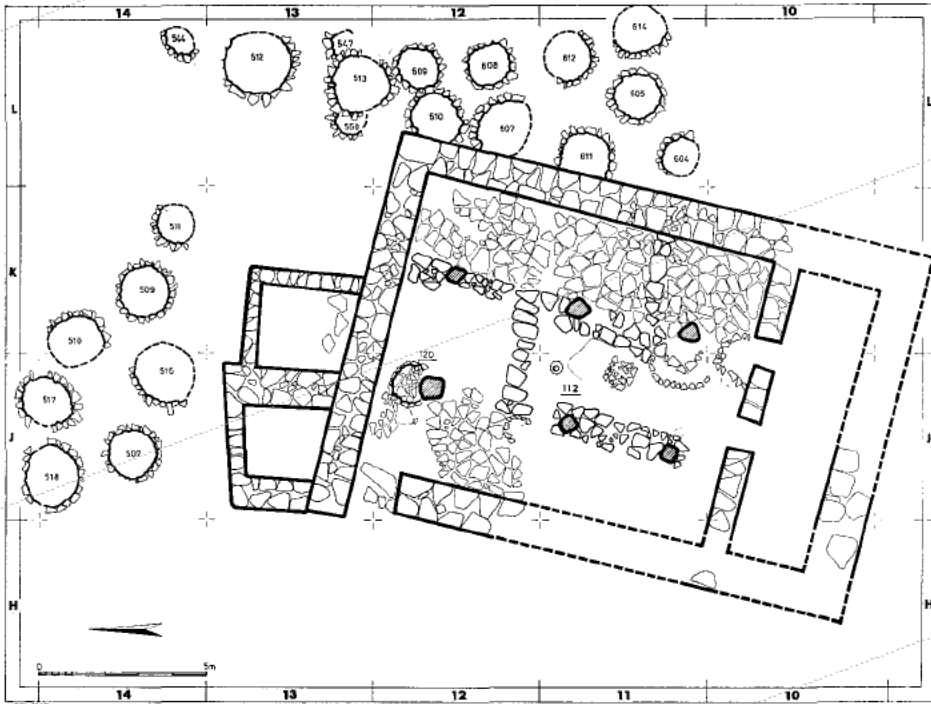


Fig. 2. "Four-room house" and adjacent silos.

who were in control of the plains. In the great confrontation between Israel and Philistia ca. 1050 B.C.E. the settlement was abandoned, and only after a generation or so did the former inhabitants return to rebuild their homes. They do not seem to have persevered in their reoccupation of the site — perhaps because after David's conquest of the Yarkon basin, they were no longer barred from moving to attractive valley sites such as Tel Aphek with its abundant water sources and fertile fields: 'Izbet Şarṭah was then deserted and forgotten.⁴

3. DISCOVERY AND DECIPHERMENT OF THE OSTRACON

During the excavation season of August 1976, two sherds were found in Silo 605, east of the four-room house; when fitted together, these sherds proved to be an ostrakon bearing five lines of incised letters. Silo 605, unfortunately, cannot be assigned incontestably to any of the three strata at the site. Stratigraphically the picture is as follows: Silos 611, 607 and 610 (adjacent to Silo 605) abut onto the four-room house, and therefore belong to Stratum II; Silo 513 and the northwest pillar of the house cut into the earlier silos of Stratum III (Fig. 2). Since most of the silos seem to have been dug in the earlier two strata, Silo 605 was presumably also dug at the same time, i.e. between ca. 1200–1050 B.C.E. However, it might be argued that Silo 605 was reutilized in Stratum I and therefore on a stratigraphical basis an 11th century date is not precluded for the ostrakon, since the sherd does not lend itself to independent dating.

The ostrakon itself, roughly trapezoidal in shape, comes from the body of a large storage jar (Pl. 1). Its average thickness is 8 mm. and maximum height and width are 9 x 16 cm. The surface of the sherd was wet-smoothed in a direction other than that of the wheel marks; traces of this smoothing process are clearly discernible, interfering with the decipherment of the inscription and making it difficult in some places to distinguish between the intentional incisions, blurred by the wet-smoothing process, and various scratches and cracks on the face of the sherd.

Eighty-three letters in five lines were incised on this sherd with a very fine-pointed instrument (the width and depth of the incisions do not exceed 1/10 mm.). Line 1 = 10 letters; line 2 = 17 letters; line 3 = 6 letters; line 4 = 28 letters; line 5 = 22 letters. The fifth and bottom line has relatively large letters and deeper and bolder incisions than the other lines; it is also the straightest line. These characteristics, as well as its contents, indicate that it was the first line to have been incised on the sherd, perhaps as an abecedarium for a copying exercise. The next line to have been written (most likely by a different hand) is apparently the fourth line from the top. The longest line on the ostrakon, it curves in a shallow arc; its final letters on the right-hand side are twisted around between the end of line 5 and the edge of the sherd. Line 3, the shortest, may best be understood if we assume that lines 1, 2 and 3 were incised in that sequence,

4 For the historical background in the light of the archaeological survey of the region and the excavations at Tel Aphek and at 'Izbet Şarṭah, see Kochavi *Had. Arch.* 47:26–28; Kochavi 1976.

after lines 4 and 5 were already written, thus leaving very little space for line 3, the very last to have been incised; its six letters therefore had to be crowded into the narrow space remaining between the beginnings of lines 2 and 4. The bottom part of the sherd is blank, leaving an equidistant margin between line 5 and the bottom edge of the sherd. This margin, as well as the downward curve of the right-hand side of line 4, indicates that both the right-hand and bottom edges are the original borders of the ostrakon and were not broken off after the sherd was inscribed. Presumably the other two edges are also the original borders; at any rate, there are no grounds to assume otherwise.

The only line we were able to decipher in a meaningful way, beyond the simple reading of individual letters, is line 5.⁵ This line has 22 letters, beginning with *'alef* at the left and ending with *taw* at the right (Fig. 3). Reading from left to right, the order of the letters is: ' , B, G, D, H, W, H, Z, T, Y, K, L, [M], N, S, P, ' , Š, Q, Q, Š, T. In spite of the minor deviations (and/or errors) from the conventional alphabetic order, there is no doubt that this is the earliest Proto-Canaanite abecedarly that has so far come to light.

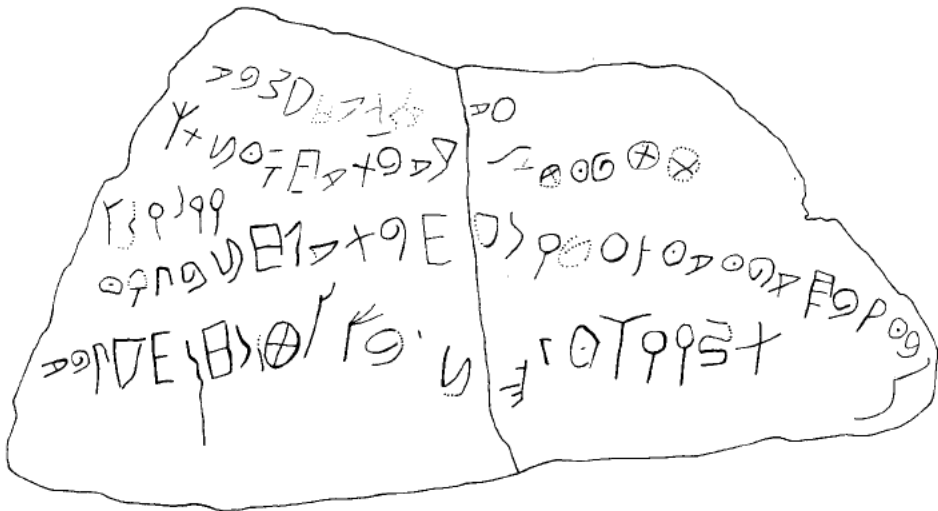


Fig. 3. Drawing of ostrakon.

Following is our suggested transcription of the ostrakon:

- 1 עא ? תא חדש ב/ל א
- 2 טט ב/ל עט ! דא ב/ל תא חקענתכ
- 3 קק שק ? ש
- 4 שבער ב/ל חא ל/ב עאע ? ע ל/ב קודה ל/ב תאגחנ ב/ל פקע
- 5 תשקצעפסנ [מ] לכיטזוהדגבא

5 In the decipherment of the inscription, I was assisted by my friend and colleague Prof. Y. Naveh of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to whom I am deeply grateful. Specific problems arising during the decipherment were clarified in consultation with Mr. Aaron Demsky of Bar-Ilan University, who was also the first to recognize the Hebrew abecedarly in the bottom row of the ostrakon (see his article following). For the success in deciphering the ostrakon, I wish to thank the following: Mr. Arieh Bornstein, a student of archaeology from Tel Aviv University, who was

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LINE 1	LINE 2	LINE 3	LINE 4	LINE 5	
פ פ פ	פ פ		פ פ פ	פ	א
פ	פ		פ פ פ	פ	ב
			פ	פ	ג
ד	ד		ד	ד	ד
			ה	ה	ה
				ו	ו
ז	ח		ח ח	ח	ח
			ט	י	י
	י			י	י
	כ			כ	כ
	ל		ל	ל	ל
					[מ]
	נ		נ	נ	נ
				ס	ס
			פ	פ	פ
פ	פ פ		פ פ פ פ פ	פ	פ
		פ		פ	צ
	ק	ק ק ק	ק ק	ק ק	ק
			ר		[ר]
ש		ש	ש	ש	ש
ת	ת ת		ת	ת	ת

Fig. 4. Table of ostracon letters.

1954), but here the similarity ends. These javelin heads are dated to the end of the 12th century B.C.E. From the point of view of evolutionary development, the 'Izbet Şarṭah 'alef should therefore be dated to the end of the 13th or beginning of the 12th century B.C.E., or in round figures, 1200 B.C.E.

Bet: This letter is one of the most problematic at 'Izbet Şarṭah. There is no uniformity in its shape, and it is difficult to determine when the writer intended *bet* and when *lamed*. Perhaps the letters with the bent shaft are *bet* and those with the straight shaft are *lamed*, but this is only a supposition. From the nine letters that may be either *bet* or *lamed*, we identified, according to this theory, five as *bet* and four as *lamed*. The curled head of the letters *bet/lamed* are peculiar to our ostrakon. There are no similarly shaped letters from other inscriptions, with the possible exception of the *bet* on the cylinder seal published by Goetze (1953), which is dated by Cross to the 14th–13th centuries.⁷ The 4th letter and the next to the last in line 4 are closest to the conventional *bet* although even they have no exact analogies, since all the *bets* of this period have the straight lines and sharp angles “evolving” from the rectangular *bet* of Proto-Sinaitic.

Gimel: The *gimel* of our ostrakon is also difficult to distinguish from another letter, namely *pe*. In our opinion, in addition to the *gimel* in the alphabetic line, the 7th letter of line 4 should also be read as *gimel*. These letters face in opposite directions, but mixed stances were used indiscriminately in the period in which the ostrakon was written, and this inconsistency is common with the other letters as well. The *gimel* of 'Izbet Şarṭah with its erect shaft and the small angle between the shaft and arm resembles more the *gimel* of the 10th century onwards than the *gimel* of the 12th–11th centuries B.C.E. (Cross 1967:15*).

Dalet: This letter appears three times in our ostrakon: the 4th letter in the alphabetic line; the 12th letter in line 4; the 4th letter in line 1; possibly the triangular letter with a “tail” in line 2 is also a *dalet*.

The *dalet* of 'Izbet Şarṭah is an almost right-angled triangle, standing on its apex and facing right. The *dalet* of the arrowheads are somewhat similar, but they are isosceles or equilateral triangles, while the triangular *dalet* of the 'Aḥiram sarcophagus and the Gezer calendar, although right-angled, have shifted stance and face left. Our *dalet* is therefore unique, but it is questionable whether this is of any chronological significance.

He: This letter, which has the form of the letter 'E' of the Greek and Latin alphabets – perhaps favouring the earlier date for the adoption of the Hebrew-Poenician script by the Greeks – appears in the 5th place in the alphabetic line and the 11th place in line 4. This *he* makes a most valuable contribution to our knowledge of the evolution of the Canaanite-Hebrew script, being the only known example dating to the interval falling between the time of the Proto-Sinaitic script and the 10th century B.C.E. It is notable that the 'Izbet Şarṭah form is almost identical to Cross' suggested reconstruction in his table showing the typological development of the Proto-Canaanite script

7 In Goetze's photograph (1953:8; Fig. 1) the head of the *bet* seems to be more tightly curled than in Cross' drawing (1962:14).

(1967:15*). Like our *'alef* and *gimel*, the *he* is also written with a left-to-right stance instead of the normative right-to-left stance of the 10th century onwards.

Waw: If this character did not stand in the 6th place in the alphabetic line, it is doubtful whether we would have suggested reading it as *waw*. Apart from being a vertical stroke, it has very little in common either with the *waw* of the Proto-Sinaitic script with its circular, closed head (exactly like the *qof* of our ostrakon!) nor with the normative "open-headed" *waw*. This letter appears only once in our ostrakon; possibly the writer of the abecedy was unfamiliar with its correct form and/or wrote it erroneously.

Het: In the anomalous position of *het* in the abecedy, occupying the place reserved for *zayin* in the Hebrew alphabet, we encounter the first significant departure from the normative alphabetic sequence. We are unable to offer any explanation for this switch. The letter *het* appears four more times, three of which are similar to the abecedarian *het* and are written in a vertical "column" slanting upwards towards the right in lines 1, 3 and 4 of the ostrakon. These *hets* each have three crossbars connecting the two verticals, thus forming a rectangle divided into two halves. Such a *het* is found on the javelin-heads from El-Khaḍr and the arrowhead from Ruweiseh. A fifth and different *het* (23rd place in line 4) has four crossbars, the left-hand vertical extending downwards beyond its juncture with the lowest bar. A similar *het* is found both in the Proto-Sinaitic script and on the Byblian spatula; on the latter it appears together with a three-stroke *het* (Cross 1967:15*; Donner and Röllig 1964:Tafel 1). Apparently, both types of *het*, as well as the Raddana variant, were used indiscriminately from the 15th to 11th centuries B.C.E.

Zayin: No letter definitely deciphered as *zayin* was fully preserved on the ostrakon, but apparently we should read the two incisions directly following the *het* in the alphabetic line (and perhaps also the 13th character of line 4) as a previously unknown form of *zayin*.

The Proto-Canaanite/Hebrew *zayin* originated in the Proto-Sinaitic *z*, represented by two parallel horizontal strokes. The earliest *zayin* known to us comes from the Beth-shemesh ostrakon (according to Cross' reading) and has two verticals joined by a horizontal. In the final "evolution" of the letter it has shifted 90 degrees to produce a broad 'I'-shaped letter written with two horizontals connected by a vertical.⁸ From a typological-chronological aspect, the 'Izbet Šarṭah *zayin* should apparently be fitted in somewhere between the *z* of Proto-Sinaitic and Lachish prism (15th century B.C.E.) and the *zayin* of the Beth-shemesh ostrakon (12th century B.C.E.).

Tet: In addition to the *tet* of the alphabetic line, which appears in its proper order, 9th from the left, similar forms of *tet* appear three times at the end of line 2. The *tet* of the 'Izbet Šarṭah ostrakon is identical to the *tet* of the 10th century Hebrew and Phoenician inscriptions; our specimen is the earliest *tet* yet to have been discovered.

8 See the following examples of *z* in Albright's publication of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions (1969): Fig. 1; Fig. 2 (the Lachish prism); Fig. 4: no. 349; Fig. 5: nos. 351, 353, etc.; Cross' viewpoints on this subject (1976:18 no. 64).

Yod: The 10th letter from the left in the alphabetic line is similar to the *yod* first identified by Cross (1954:Fig. 2) on the Lachish ewer inscription and which subsequently turned up in the Proto-Sinaitic texts and elsewhere. The *yod* of 'Izbet Şarṭah is lacking its lower appendage, nor is its arm exactly like the examples mentioned above; considering, however, that the form of this letter was stabilized already in the 11th century, the 'Izbet Şarṭah *yod* should be looked upon as an intermediate form used around the 12th century B.C.E.

Kaf: This letter appears in its conventional place in the alphabetic line, as well as at the beginning of line 2. Somewhat unexpectedly in such an early inscription, the 'Izbet Şarṭah *kaf* has a long, straight shaft. This shaft is not a direct extension or elongation of one of the fingers of the *kaf*, such as found on the Gezer calendar and later; evidently it is a transitional form between the "armless" *kaf* of the Proto-Sinaitic and Proto-Canaanite scripts and the fully developed *kaf*.

Lamed: We have already noted (in our discussion of the letter *bet*) the difficulty of distinguishing between *bet* and *lamed* in our ostrakon. Upon close scrutinization of these two letters in our alphabetic line, we see that they differ mainly in the size and tightness of the coil. It is doubtful if these differences are significant. The 'Izbet Şarṭah *lamed* is remarkably similar to those of the Lachish ewer and the Beth-shemesh ostrakon, although the stance is different. (The 15th letter of line 2 is identical in every particular except its stance to the Lachish ewer *lamed*). Several of our *lamed* forms (if we have distinguished correctly between the *bet* and the *lamed*; see discussion above) in the other lines (e.g. the 10th letter in line 4) resemble the Proto-Sinaitic *lamed* (Albright 1969: Fig. 4: nos. 349, 357; Fig. 9: no. 358). As an aid in establishing the date of our ostrakon, we may compare it with the 11th century El-Khaḍr *lamed*, which is far more "developed" than the 'Izbet Şarṭah example and retains none of its archaic features.

Mem: The space this letter would be expected to occupy in the alphabetic line remained almost blank. The small incision at the upper left is all that remains. Considering that there is no letter elsewhere on the ostrakon even vaguely identifiable as *mem*, we may assume that the writer (or writers) either didn't know how to write *mem*—or forgot to.

Nun: The letter *nun* appears three times in our inscription: once in its proper sequence in the alphabetic line (14th place), secondly in the 3rd place in line 2, and finally in the 5th place in line 4. The form of the 'Izbet Şarṭah *nun* is far removed from the snake pictograph of the Proto-Sinaitic script and much closer to the *nun* of late Proto-Canaanite, e.g. those of the Beth-shemesh ostrakon and the Lebanese arrowheads (Cross 1967:15*); the curved leg of the 'Izbet Şarṭah *nun* is unique and unparalleled.

Samekh: Following *nun* in the alphabetic line appear traces of a letter that apparently must be identified with *samekh*. A vertical stroke is preserved with either three or four horizontals joining it (the lowest horizontal may be only a scratch on the sherd). Its similarity to *samekh*—which hithertofore has not been found before the 10th century—would be complete if the horizontals had crossed the vertical. Completely lacking analogies, it is difficult to decide whether this letter is an early form of *samekh* or whether it is merely defectively executed.

Pe: Neither for this letter is there any comparative material dating to the 12th–11th centuries. Our specimen closely resembles the *pe* of the 10th century, and like the *gimel* (which it also resembles), has a left-to-right stance instead of the conventional right-to-left stance of dextrosinistral Hebrew writing. The 3rd and 7th letters in line 4 are also similar to *pe*. As in the case of *het/zayin*, the *pe* and *'ayin* in the alphabetic line have also switched places.⁹

'Ayin: Apart from the *'ayin* in the alphabetic line, this letter appears eight more times in the inscription. Six of these have a dot in the centre (e.g. the *'ayin* of the alphabetic line), the other two being dotless (the last letter of line 1 and the 16th letter of line 4). Most of the *'ayins* are fairly round, and only in a few cases (e.g. the *'ayin* at the beginning of line 4) is the circle somewhat compressed. The true Proto-Sinaitic eye does not appear in our inscription at all. The 'Izbet Šarṭah *'ayin*, as well as the mixed appearance of a dotted and undotted *'ayin* is known from the 13th–11th century inscriptions from Beth-shemesh, Tell es-Sârem, El-Khaḍr, etc. (Cross 1967:15*).

Šade: In addition to the *šade* appearing in normal sequence in the alphabetic line, the 1st letter of line 3 should probably also be read as *šade*. The form of the 'Izbet Šarṭah *šade* differs from all other known examples, but nevertheless has a slight resemblance to the *šade* of the arrowheads (Cross 1967:15*). In Cross' opinion, the Canaanite-Hebrew *šade* did not evolve from the plant pictograph of the Proto-Sinaitic script, which is *z* (Milik and Cross 1954:14). Albright considered that this grapheme represented both *š* and *z*, which had already coalesced in Proto-Semitic (1969:31; Fig. 1). The 'Izbet Šarṭah *šade* evidently confirms Albright's theory regarding the evolution of the Hebrew *šade*: first it lost the central "petal" of the "blossom", then the remaining "petals"; only then came the development that rotated it 90 degrees to produce the *šade* of the 10th century and onwards.

Qof: This letter appears in proper sequence in the alphabetic line, albeit twice. Since the letter *resh* is missing in our abecedar, ¹⁰ we might assume that the writer intended to write *resh* and absent-mindedly wrote an extra *qof* instead. Besides these two *qofs* there are four more identical ones and another two "possibles" (the 5th letter of line 2 and the 2nd of line 4). An exact parallel to the 'Izbet Šarṭah *qof* is difficult to find in any extant inscription dating between the 12th–11th centuries B.C.E. A similar sign appears (sometimes vertically, sometimes horizontally) in the Proto-Sinaitic script (where it is identified as *waw*). From the 10th century on, the vertical bisects the circle at the top, which is usually somewhat compressed. A resemblance may be observed in the first letter of the Shiptiba'l inscription (end of the 10th century B.C.E.). Our *qof* is therefore typologically intermediate between the Proto-Sinaitic *qof* in the form of the figure '8' and the later *qof*.

Resh: Although this letter was skipped over by the abecedarian (as noted above), it appears in conventional form as the 25th letter of line 4. The 'Izbet Šarṭah *resh* has the

9 For the significance of the *pe/'ayin* switch in the abecedar, see the following article by A. Demsky.

10 For a contrary opinion, see Demsky's article.

left-to-right stance corresponding to the sinistrodextral direction of the entire inscription. The head of the *resh* is half rounded, like some of the *resh* forms of the Aḥiram sarcophagus; more remarkably, it is almost identical to the corresponding letter in the Greek alphabet!

Shin: Apart from the *shin* in the alphabetic line, the 3rd character in line 1 also appears to be a *shin*. Perhaps the last letter of line 4, which has run off the end of the line for lack of space, was also intended as a *shin*; likewise the 4th character of line 3.

The form of the *shin* in line 1 is remarkably similar to the *shin* of the Lachish ewer, the Lachish bowl and the sherd from Tell eš Šārem.¹¹ On the other hand, the *shin* in the alphabetic line resembles the Proto-Sinaitic š/t (e.g., Albright 1969:Fig. 5: nos. 352–353). If we were to take into consideration only these two *shin* forms, we should have to date the entire inscription to the 14th–13th centuries B.C.E.

Taw: This letter is the last of the 22-letter abecedy. It appears another three times in lines 2 and 4. If we consider the 7th letter of line 1 as an (incomplete) *taw*, we would have the combinationn 't appearing three times in a vertical column in lines 1, 2 and 4.

The form of this letter—two strokes crossing at the centre—remained unchanged from the Proto-Sinaitic script down to the 10th century, exactly as it appears at 'Izbet Šarṭah.

Summary: The Iron Age I site at 'Izbet Šarṭah, located on a ridge opposite Aphek on the road to Shiloh, was the scene of the battle of Eben-ezer between the Israelites and Philistines. The site is in many respects typical of the earliest Israelite settlements, the excavations having revealed its history as follows: founded during the Israelite conquest and settlement period (13–12th centuries), abandoned in the wake of the battle of Eben-ezer (ca. 1050 B.C.E.), resettled for a short period at the beginning of the monarchy (ca. 1000 B.C.E.) and shortly thereafter abandoned forever.

The ostrakon, found in one of the silos, may be dated on archaeological grounds to the same span of time as the occupation of the site, i.e., to the 12th–11th centuries B.C.E.; on palaeographic grounds its date may be more precisely determined as ca. 1200 B.C.E.

The palaeographic analysis reveals that most of the letters of the ostrakon are written in the Proto-Canaanite linear script of the 13th–12th centuries B.C.E., retaining very little of the pictographic elements of the Proto-Sinaitic script. The horizontal-sinistrodextral direction of the writing and a 22-letter alphabet are a common phenomenon during this period.

The abecedy at the bottom of the ostrakon is the earliest to appear in the corpus of Proto-Canaanite inscriptions, and together with the copying exercise of the upper lines roughly doubles the amount of palaeographic material available from the period.

This ostrakon provides a wealth of data likely to cast new light on old problems, such as the evidence it supplies supporting an early date for the adoption of the Semitic alphabet by the Greeks (Naveh 1973; Mazar 1974) and the means by which it was transmitted to the Aegean (the Philistines?). By demonstrating the existence of a

¹¹ These three inscriptions are published together in *Enc. Miqr. I*:386.

written tradition and original Hebrew alphabetic order already at the beginning of the 12th century B.C.E., the inscription necessitates a re-evaluation regarding the general level of literacy during the period of the Judges and the extent to which the Canaanite linear script was adopted by the Israelites independently of any intermediacy of the Phoenicians.

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