The Handwriting of the Gezer Tablet

E. J. Pilcher

To cite this article: E. J. Pilcher (1910) The Handwriting of the Gezer Tablet, Palestine Exploration Quarterly, 42:1, 32-39, DOI: [10.1179/peq.1910.42.1.32](https://doi.org/10.1179/peq.1910.42.1.32)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/peq.1910.42.1.32>

Published online: 20 Nov 2013.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

Article views: 4

View related articles [↗](#)

THE HANDWRITING OF THE GEZER TABLET.

By Mr. E. J. PILCHER.

THE Alphabet of the Ancient Hebrews is known to us chiefly from a number of seal-stones, specimens of which have been illustrated in the *Quarterly Statement* from time to time. The letters upon these seal-stones vary appreciably in form, and we must either assume that several styles of writing were in use simultaneously, or that the alphabet was employed over a considerable period, and that in the course of its life it gradually became modified. Neither of these theories is capable of absolute proof; but the latter is the more probable, because we find some signets agreeing in the form of their letters with the characters upon the oldest known North Semitic inscriptions, while other signets have letters that are very similar in shape to those found upon the Jewish coinage, and even recalling peculiarities of the modern Samaritan script. The question arises, therefore, as to how far this period of use and modification extends. It does not appear that we can carry these engraved gems further back than the time of the Assyrian deportations, for some of the most ancient of them have been found, not in Palestine, but in Mesopotamia. Thus the seal of Shemaiah ben Azariah, one of the most archaic, was procured in Aleppo by M. Waddington, and it is tempting to imagine that it originally belonged to some Israelite, carried away from his native land upon the capture of Samaria by Sargon in B.C. 722. The style, the material, and the epigraphy, all agree very well with that epoch. But when we go to the other end of the scale, and seek to know when this particular class of signets ceased to be used, we have no tangible evidence to guide us. We are aware that somewhere near the beginning of the Christian era the Aramean, or "Square," alphabet became the official script of the Jews; but there are practically no seal-stones bearing Hebrew names engraved in any ancient form of the Square character. Our earliest knowledge of it comes from epitaphs and ossuaries. It is hardly to be supposed that the living employed seals with old Hebrew inscriptions at the same time that the dead

were being commemorated in Square letters; but it is remarkable that there should apparently be no overlapping of the two styles of writing. The art of the signets does not help us very much, for when they present anything beyond the mere names of the owners the designs are usually in that nondescript style familiar to us from Phœnician remains. Some of the devices, however, are manifestly Persian, and this would carry us well into the period of the Persian domination, for it would take time for a Persian style to arise, and still longer to familiarize it to the subject nations. There is one extant gem, engraved with the name of Hananiah ben Azariah, surrounded by what M. Clermont-Ganneau describes as "*une grande couronne ovale de têtes de pavots ou de grenades.*" These "têtes" look to me to be more like the lily flowers upon the Maccabean shekels. The lettering of the gem is very late, and there may be a connection; but as the date and epigraphy of these shekels are still in dispute, we cannot hope for any acceptable chronology in that direction.

If we are uncertain of the period over which the use of these engraved gems extends, we are still more uncertain about the stages by which the early style of the Old Hebrew alphabet developed into the later style. If we knew approximately when each of the letters became affected by the change, we might be able to arrange our series of Hebrew signets in something approaching chronological order, but at present that is quite beyond our powers.

There is also to be considered the question of fluctuations. It would be quite erroneous to suppose that the change would always be in the one direction. Phœnician epigraphy has the advantage of a series of dated monuments, and we can observe its fluctuations. For example, the letter **ס** upon the earliest coinage of the Phœnician coast has the form **⚡**. In the reign of Artaxerxes II it becomes **⚡**, while, under the Seleucids, it reverts to the early form again. Therefore, the occasional reappearance of ancient outlines, or even a complete reversion to an earlier type, is only what is to be expected.

Still another difficulty is to be found in the old Hebrew seals themselves. These are often so carelessly executed that it is almost impossible to tell the exact form intended by the engraver. Thus upon Brit. Mus. 1046 **עבדאלא (ב) בן שבעת** at first sight we would appear to have three different forms of **א**, Mr. S. A. Cook's *a*, *b*, and *c*, upon the same object. Through the courtesy of

Dr. Budge, however, the writer has recently had an opportunity of examining the gem itself, and it is his opinion that the engraver intended **⚡** in each case. The different appearance of the letters is owing to their having been roughly shaped out by a lapidary's wheel, and, through carelessness or unskilfulness, the cuts of the wheel do not always come in the right place.

This same maladroitness may tend to explain some of the apparent variations in the shape of the **⚡**, noted by Mr. Stanley Cook (*Quarterly Statement*, 1909, p. 297). In the Silbam Inscription, and also upon the Maccabean shekels, we have the form **⚡**.

This cannot be considered a late refinement, for it can be traced back to the Nineveh weights in the eighth century. I may be wrong, but it appears to me to have been the standard old Hebrew form of the letter. It is, however, a very awkward one, and it is not surprising that it should be frequently blundered or slurred, although on some of the more carefully executed seals, the correct form is quite recognizable. It is this letter, the *van*, which offers the greatest problem in the study of the Gezer text.

But before discussing the individual letters of the Gezer inscription, it may be well to offer a few remarks upon the tablet itself. On first seeing the photograph in *Quarterly Statement*, 1909, p. 28, I suggested that it was a fragment of a larger stone. One of the chief reasons for this view was the stroke at the beginning of the third line, which looked like a dividing mark; in which case, of course, it would have been quite out of place at the commencement of a line. Mr. Macalister, however (*Quarterly Statement*, 1909, p. 89), explains this as due to a slip of the graver, caused by a hole in the surface of the tablet. Furthermore, the cast distinctly shows **⚡** at the end of l. 1, as also does Prof. Vincent's photograph of the stone (*Rev. Biblique*, 1909, p. 266). Therefore the first letter of l. 2 must be **⚡**, as Dr. Lidzbarski contended, and not **⚡**, as it superficially appears.

It may have been observed, though it does not seem to have been specifically mentioned, that although the first five lines are kept close to one another, l. 6 is much below l. 5, with the obvious intention of avoiding the gash on the right-hand edge of the stone; while the first two characters of l. 7 are cramped in order to accommodate them to the restricted space. This demonstrates that the tablet had its present shape and defects at the time the inscription

was made, and the writer was compelled to arrange his letters accordingly, so that we have not to do with a permanent record, but with a temporary writing exercise scratched upon a waste piece of limestone.

At the same time it can hardly be the work of a mere learner. The strokes are drawn steadily and firmly, without the slightest hesitation or trembling of hand. Awkward outlines, such as ע, פ, and ק, are managed with a fair amount of success, considering the nature of the material; and there is a certain grace in the forms of the letters. All this would indicate the skilful hand of the professional scribe. But the workmanship is undeniably careless. No two of the letters are exactly alike, and none of the lines of writing are straight. These same faults are found in hasty writing of the present day; but little attention is paid to them, because we know the general standard type of each character intended by the writer. In the present case, however, in several instances we do not know the standard form which was in the writer's mind, and that is the source of our difficulties.

Where the same letter appears more than once, we may be justified in taking the mean of the different outlines as being the form intended. Thus the ז, in l. 3, is intermediate in shape between the same character in ll. 4 and 5, and therefore it is probably the norm, or pattern, which the scribe had in view.

By the same rule, the ח, in l. 4, would be the normal form. The superposed ח, in l. 5, however, is laid upon its side. It is true that the same outline is found upon some of the Hasmonean coins, but in the present case the scribe has employed the ordinary upright form throughout the text, and if he had desired merely to cancel the couple of letters beneath, he might just as well have written the superposed letter in the broad shape of the two following lines. We must therefore conclude that the different appearance of this ח is due to its having been inscribed while the tablet was held on its side; that is to say, the superposed letter was written at the same time and in the same direction as the letters אב, in the left hand corner.

The form of the ח, in l. 4, is a perfectly good one, and would be valid for any known period in the history of the Old Hebrew alphabet down to the Samaritan. But it is most important to note that the Gezer scribe had two distinct ways of writing it. One method was with five strokes, *i.e.*, two uprights and three crossbars,

as in l. 4 ; while the other method was with three strokes, *i.e.*, two right angles and one crossbar, as in l. 7. Furthermore, we occasionally find a curve where a straight stroke was intended, especially in $\sqcap$, of l. 3, where the curves are particularly noticeable. All these details may appear trivial, but they are mentioned here because they may assist us to understand the γ , which is the real crux of the inscription.

On the first sight of the Gezer Tablet it was startling to observe that it seemed to present totally different types for the one letter γ . For my own part I could not believe that if the fourth character of l. 1 was a fairly good Old Hebrew γ , the sixth character of l. 2 was the same letter, and the seventh character of l. 5 also. The lettering of ancient inscriptions often presents slight variations, but nothing to this extent. However, a careful examination of the cast of the tablet, and a study of the peculiarities of the handwriting, made the difficulties appear rather less. We must remember that the scribe was a somewhat hasty and summary writer. He had more than one method of tracing the same outline, and his graver sometimes diverged into curves. Bearing these considerations well in mind, we will remark that the first γ in l. 1 has the shape γ the same outline, in fact, as that upon the Socoh pottery stamps (*Quarterly Statement*, 1899, p. 184). In this instance, the Gezer scribe has traced the letter much as we should do, first drawing γ , and then adding the dash on the right hand. But we must not forget that while we write from left to right, he wrote from right to left. Therefore it was far more natural for him to trace the right hand half of the letter first γ , and then add the left-hand dash. This would result in the γ -shaped γ noted by Mr. Cook upon some of the gems (*Quarterly Statement*, 1909, p. 297). Now, if the reader will take a pencil, and try to draw γ rapidly a few times, he will find it is by no means easy to do so. He will probably reproduce all the strange outlines of the Gezer Tablet, and some additional ones of his own.

The cast of the tablet shows that the Gezer scribe in every case except the first began to inscribe the γ by tracing the right half, and then he added the dash upon the left. His most successful effort is in l. 5, but here the imperceptible swerve of the stylus caused the stroke to appear as γ , and this was completed by

a straight dash struck in diagonally on the left. The ך, between ן and ך, at end of l. 1, is almost of the same character. In the ך, of line 2, the left-hand dash is too upright, and therefore the horns of the letter are not sufficiently wide apart. The photograph seems to show the left-hand stroke as the continuous one, but this is an optical delusion, for the cast shows clearly that it was the right-hand one which was made first. The main stroke of the ך, in l. 6, is almost straight, and therefore the scribe instinctively modified the left-hand dash in compensation. But here, again, the difference between that and the other examples is not as great as it appears in the photograph.

I trust the above description and criticism of this important character have been made sufficiently clear. If they be accepted there is no occasion to suppose that the writer of the Gezer Tablet had any knowledge of a variety of forms which might be given to this letter. He probably used, or intended to use, the one current in his day and locality, and, if he did not reproduce the standard type with absolute fidelity, the same thing applies to most of the other letters in his exercise.

As regards the other characters, the standard type is sufficiently obvious. The strange appearance of the ך, in l. 5, is probably accidental. The ך is an exaggeration of the Zenjerli type, being sloped downwards too much to the left. The example in l. 6 has an extra stroke in the head, but this is probably one of the idiosyncracies of the scribe. The ך, between ll. 4 and 5, does not appear to possess this extra addition, but one cannot be sure about it. At the end of l. 4 there seem to me to be traces of a ן, and in this Prof. Vincent agrees. The ך beneath may possibly be a correction of the writer for a ן originally written.

It is a matter for satisfaction that in this short and tautological inscription there should be eighteen of the letters of the Old Hebrew alphabet. Of the four missing ones ך and ן are not of much palaeographic importance, ך usually follows the outline of ך, and ן is so very rare that it can only be regarded as a curiosity.

But there still remains the question of the place of the Gezer Tablet in the history of the development of the old Hebrew alphabet. Mr. Cook has recalled that some years ago I discussed the date of the Siloam Inscription in two essays (*P.S.B.A.*, 1897, pp. 165 ff.; 1898, pp. 213 ff.), and suggested that the monument really belonged to the time of Herod, relying chiefly upon certain relics discovered

in the foundations of the Temple of Jerusalem. It must be confessed that later discoveries have not supported this particular date, for the gems and pottery stamps which have since been unearthed have not been found associated with Greek or Roman remains, as would be required by the Herodian theory. But my essays also discussed the genealogy of the Old Hebrew alphabet, and endeavoured to demonstrate that the characters of the Siloam text were of an extremely late type, finding their chief analogies upon the Jewish coins and the earliest Samaritan inscriptions. These palaeographic arguments still seem to me to be valid, and I am naturally gratified to find that they also appeal to Mr. Cook. The differences between the characters upon the Siloam Inscription and those of the North Semitic inscriptions of the eighth century are so great that it seems necessary to assume that the Siloam text is separated from the eighth century by a considerable period of time. What that period of time may have been is a question still open for discussion. We have seen above that the scraps of writing upon the Old Hebrew signets cannot be positively dated, and the matter is still further complicated by doubts as to the exact place of the silver shekels in Jewish chronology. My own opinion still is that they date from the great rebellion of A.D. 66, but most numismatists seem agreed in assigning them to Simon Maccabeus about B.C. 140. Even then there is plenty of time for the development of the peculiarities of the Siloam alphabet, though we have still to determine the successive stages by which that development took place.

The Gezer text seems to belong to one of the earliest of these stages. As Mr. Cook has pointed out, it differs very little from the type of alphabet which was common to all the North Semitic nations between B.C. 850 and B.C. 700. If we neglect minor details, which may only be due to the handwriting of this particular scribe, the differences limit themselves to the γ and the ζ . It would not be safe to lay too much stress upon the γ , for that has pretensions to antiquity; at any rate it was in use at Nineveh in the seventh and eighth centuries. But the ζ differs appreciably from the standard North Semitic type, and has taken the step which leads on by successive deformations to the peculiar character found upon the נצף weights, the Siloam Inscription, and the Maccabean shekels. Therefore the palaeographer is now informed for the first time that it was the ζ which headed the evolution of the Old Hebrew alphabet, and

it is to be hoped that future discoveries will reveal to us the order of the other changes, such as the fashion of bending the tails of the characters round to the left, and the addition of tags as essential parts of the letter. Neither of these refinements is foreshadowed in the Gezer writing; although, as Mr. Cook has noted, the scribe was inclined to tilt the tail of the *yod* sometimes up and sometimes down.

It being established that the text registers for us the first step in the alphabetic change, it would still be of interest to know the period when that step was made. For this we must rely upon the circumstances of its discovery, and we can only note that the carefully observed position of the relic in the excavations, and the associated remains, indicate the sixth century B.C. as the approximate date of the tablet.

Independently of its palaeographic value the Gezer text is a welcome addition to our growing knowledge of the social life of the ancient Hebrews. The climate and soil of Palestine render it very unlikely that we shall ever recover any ancient specimen of current writing upon parchment or papyrus; but the Gezer Tablet is to all intents and purposes a manuscript, for it has all the characteristics of actual handwriting. The fingers of the scribe were probably more familiar with the reed pen than with the stylus, and he has scratched upon this piece of limestone a valuable example of the fugitive, everyday, writing of his time and people.

GREEK INSCRIPTIONS FROM DAMASCUS.

By the Rev. J. E. HANAUER, M.A., with Notes by the

Rev. H. S. CRONIN, M.A.

1. In a letter from Damascus, dated March 2nd, the Rev. J. E. Hanauer writes:

“Whilst making some alterations in the lower part of a house built on the northern side of the great eastern gateway in the ancient outer enclosure of the former Temple, where now stands the great Mosque, the northern end of the architrave and lintel over the small side gate has been partly exposed. It bears two inscriptions, of which, however, only the ends can be seen. One is