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THE GEZER HEBREW INSCRIPTION.

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IN response to the invitation in the last *Quarterly Statement* (p. 1), I beg to communicate some suggestions on the very interesting Hebrew document discovered by Mr. Macalister, and reproduced in that issue in a manner which leaves nothing to be desired by those who have not seen the tablet itself. I commented upon it for the first time on January 12th, in my opening course of lectures on Semitic Epigraphy, pointing out that the text appeared to be complete in itself, that the twelve months of the year are found there in a particular manner, but that it was not necessary to see in it a calendar in any sense of the word.

To establish these conclusions, it was necessary, however, for me to arrive at certainty touching three important material points. First. Is the tablet complete on the right edge? Mr. Macalister clearly affirms it (p. 16), while Mr. Pilcher denies it, as though he had examined the object *de visu*. Second. Are there or are there not any traces of letters below the seventh horizontal line? Professor Lidzbarski inclines to the affirmative. And, finally. Is the sign which precedes the initial letter, l. 3, a mark of separation identical with those in ll. 1 and 2? Mr. Pilcher admits it without hesitation.

For these three questions I had recourse to the courtesy of Mr. Macalister, with whom I have been in correspondence for more than a year, and I received his reply to this effect (January 25):—

“On the right-hand side the inscription is certainly *complete*—not broken or cut, as Mr. Pilcher believes. The original surface of the edge is intact, apart from some few insignificant splinters which in no way affect the epigraphy. There is no trace of an eighth line below l. 7. The square hole which is seen at the fracture occupies almost a third of the surface. I think, therefore, that if an eighth line ever existed, it must be sought below the hole On the left side, in the vertical line, there was doubtless the scribe's name (Abi). As for the stroke at the beginning of the

third line, it is due to an accidental prolongation of the vertical shaft of the upper letter."

This valuable information on the part of the fortunate discoverer of the tablet confirmed the view I had reached. As Mr. Macalister has already observed, the tablet was intended to be fixed, and, no doubt, vertically. What were the original dimensions of the missing portion? Without the discovery of this fragment one can only affirm that the presence of the vertical line clearly presupposes a minimum height equivalent to thrice the average height of the characters in the text. On the other hand, if there were other horizontal lines, they must, as Mr. Macalister has remarked, have appeared *below* the hole. One may then, before any further enquiry, ask if the horizontal text which we possess is complete in itself; that is to say, if it does not furnish a sequence independent of the hypothetical text which may have followed below the hole. On *a priori* grounds this is very probable.

In fact, if we suppose that there were other horizontal lines, we must also admit that the hole is really old, as Mr. Macalister implies, and as I unhesitatingly agree. There was nothing to prevent the writing of a short horizontal line on the right and left of the hole, and yet we know positively that there is no trace of any letter below the seventh line. It is even very probable that the tablet was already fixed in position when the text was inscribed. I see a proof of this in the slant of the letters . . . אב towards the right, natural enough when one had to trace vertically letters ordinarily horizontal. In this way one is led to conclude that if there really was an eighth horizontal line, it was separated from the others by a considerable space. We have to note also how short the seventh line is; one may well suppose that the text terminates here, and that it only remained to sign one or two proper names, on the right and on the left of the hole. Thus, do not all these considerations authorize the assumption that the seven lines are complete in themselves? Only a mere presumption, let me hasten to say; and it is better to come to the direct proofs which are to be drawn from the text itself.

This text has been deciphered in a masterly manner by Professors Lidzbarski and Gray: their readings agree essentially, and only in regard to the value of the last letter in the first line am I in doubt. Professor Lidzbarski sees there א, and Professor Gray a א. The fact is that one cannot clearly distinguish either of these letters upon the

photograph. Professor Gray recognises this, but נ appears to him necessary because the first letter of the second line resembles ט rather than נ, the reading adopted by Professor Lidzbarski. Only an examination of the original will clear up the difficulty. But whether we adopt the word נורע, or whether we decide for נטע, the interpretation proposed below remains unchanged. As regards the rather doubtful passage in the fifth line, I admit that the last letter but one is a *kaph*; palaeographically there is scarcely any other possibility.

In addition to alphabetical characters, this text twice contains the mark of separation—on the first two lines. It is very evident that this sign, thus placed before the word “month,” takes the place of the break in the other five lines, each beginning with the same word; and, on the other hand, if this mark does not appear on these lines, it was because it was quite unnecessary, the commencement of a fresh line sufficiently indicating the required separation. There remains one character, which approaches the form of a *waw*; Professor Lidzbarski has believed it possible to give it the value either of a mark of separation or even that of a *he*, after the Sabaeen form, according as the context demands. To me, as also to Professor Gray, the sign is everywhere a *waw*, and nothing less, though I much doubt whether it is necessary to give it the syntactical value which, *faute de mieux*, the learned Professor of Mansfield College has attributed to it.

In my opinion ירח ואסף means simply “a month and storage”; ירח וזרע, “a month and sowing,” and so on. To put it differently, a month passes, *then* comes such and such an agricultural operation, lasting probably a month, more or less, as in the case of ll. 3, 4, and 5. If one adopts this view, and if one observes that the article nowhere appears in our inscription, the general meaning of the text is very sensibly changed.

Another important detail is to be observed. The word כל, in l. 5, which Professor Lidzbarski translates “all,” or “all the rest,” can scarcely have this meaning. It is the word כיל (כיל) “measuring of grain,” as in Arabic.¹ (Compare also the word עצר, which is to be explained through the Arabic.)

¹ Or, rather, as in Aramaic (*cp.* the Syriac and Jewish-Aramaic), if we admit, with Fraenkel, that the Arabic term and its derivatives are borrowed. It goes without saying that it is not necessary to assume the pronunciation *kail*, but rather *kél* or *kil*.

I think, moreover, that if in l. 4 the word קצר signifies "harvest" (of the barley), it means rather "threshing" in l. 5, where it is left undetermined and brought near to כל. There is, in fact, nothing to show that the vocalisation of the consonants must be the same in both lines, and, on the other hand, we do know from the Arabic that the root קצר, or قصل (which may be legitimately associated), has also the special sense to sift, or thresh cereals. The threshing referred to in l. 5 would associate itself either with the barley mentioned in the previous line, or with the wheat, the harvest of which is not explicitly mentioned in our text. The simple term קצר may have been used around Gezer to designate this particular harvest.

As regards זמר (compare the vulgar Arabic زبر الكرم), the operation which this term recalls has not been so displaced in the series of agricultural duties as has been supposed; the pruning of the vine in our modern East follows pretty soon after the period of *baidar*.¹

This being granted I would propose to translate the inscription as follows:—

1. A month and storage. A month and sow-
2. ing (?). A month and hay-harvest.
3. A month of the harvest of flax.
4. A month of the harvest of barley.
5. A month of threshing and of measuring.
6. A month and pruning (of the vine).
7. A month of interruption (?).

Thus conceived, one sees that there is no more ground for taking the contents of our text to be incomplete. The eight items commencing with the word "month" do not correspond each to a single determined month, but all the months, beginning with the autumn, are successively represented *grosso modo* in a series of periods devoted, some to labours which are not determined, others to certain agricultural operations designated by their usual names.

Another indication that it is not a *fragment* of an agricultural calendar is the unsuitability of the last term קץ in such a case.

¹ זמר may also denote the whole of the work which, towards the period of *baidar*, is executed in viticulture in order to hasten the ripening (lopping, baring).

If we read קיץ "summer," "heat," the extreme improbability that the text would speak of a *month of heat* or of *summer* forms a stumbling-block. If with Professors Lidzbarski and Gray, we prefer "gathering of fruits," the operation presupposed is not in harmony with the preceding duties, unless we refer to the vintage, which, strictly speaking, is possible. But it is very improbable that קיץ could ever designate the grape-harvest, and if it were so, the text would be entirely complete, as I maintain, since the oriental agricultural year invariably ends up with the vintages. For all these reasons it seems to me preferable to render קיץ " (a month of) interruption," in reference to all the labours, agricultural or not, to which the inscription alludes.

It is to be presumed then, that, far from being a fancy, due to some idle peasant, this tablet may have had in its time an absolutely direct and even official value. The two-fold fact that it was certainly intended to be fixed up and that it seems to bear a signature confirms this conclusion in a singular manner.¹ For example, we might regard it as a copy or an extract of some administrative rescript determining the periodical demands imposed upon the rural population around Gezer for a lengthy work which concerned the whole of the neighbourhood. One might also recognize a regulation fixing the order and approximate duration of the *congés* allowed to certain classes of peasants impressed for some special undertaking, such as the digging of that subterranean tunnel with steps which was discovered at Gezer itself.² The excavators, moreover, know how difficult it is at certain times of the year to retain the workmen—men, women or children—when they are summoned by their people to the work upon the fields, and especially to the harvests. Here, the periods of absence may appear long and numerous, but it is a question of occasional labourers and, if the tablet ever bore other lines of horizontal writing, it is possible that the lost portion contained precisely the distinctions which we should expect.

¹ I do not know if the upper edge of the tablet is intact. If there is any fracture one may suppose that the stone also had another hole so that it might be firmly fastened both above and below.

² Of course I do not make use of any concrete instance, I have only chosen this example because it gives a very clear idea of the *corvées* to which I have alluded.

But apart from these conjectures which one could easily multiply without arriving at any certainty, what appears to me to be beyond a doubt is that the new record from Gezer has in no way the character which has been attributed to it from first impressions. It is *not* a calendar, and justly, on this account, the agricultural operations are not enumerated either fully or with that precision and exactitude which would associate them with each of the twelve months of the year.

If this view be adopted, the Hebrew inscription so fortunately brought to light by Mr. Macalister almost possesses the interest of an historical monument. It gains equally from the linguistic and palaeographical point of view, since one may, without any improbability, ascribe it to some professional scribe, such as Gezer surely had in the ninth or eighth centuries B.C., the epoch to which the language and especially the writing point. The *gaucherie* of the inscription need make no difference: the hand which traced with a stylus these unruly characters would be much less maladroit when it held a pen. But I do not intend to insist upon the real palaeographical value of this little text: with Professors Lidzbarski and Gray, I take it to be the most ancient monument of *Hebrew* writing as yet known.

In closing these notes I need hardly confess that the wisest course would have been to await the continuation of Mr. Macalister's excavations. Fortune, which has hitherto been propitious to the indefatigable excavator, may very well favour him in his last *coup de filet*, and furnish us with the fragment which would cut short all discussion and sweep away all conjectures! *Quod est in votis!*¹

February 4th, 1909.

¹ P.S.—Further reflection has not caused me to alter my conclusions, but I have taken advantage of the delay to add some notes which answer certain objections or make my meaning more clear. It is, moreover, very probable that other scholars will have reached views if not identical, at least akin or analogous to mine.

[Date of post-script, February 14th.]