

# The Bullae of the Son of אוחל from the City of David

DANIEL VAINSTUB

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, [vainstub@bgu.ac.il](mailto:vainstub@bgu.ac.il)

## Abstract

In the excavations conducted by Y. Shiloh in the City of David in Jerusalem during 1978–1985, an impressive hoard of 45 Hebrew bullae was found in the stratum destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Two of them, stamped by the same seal, were read לאליקים בן אוחל. The *plene* spelling with *waw* for the vowel *o* in the name אוחל was a novelty in the Hebrew epigraphy of the First Temple period, as this was the first time that such a spelling had been found in a fully preserved and provenanced inscription. In this study, it will be shown that the third letter in the second name is, in fact, a *het* rather than a *he* and, hence, that the name should be read אוחל. This name is built on the root *whl*, which implies that the letter *waw* on the bullae is not a *mater lectionis*. The misreading of this letter led to a series of far-reaching conclusions concerning some aspects of the pronunciation of the Hebrew spoken by the inhabitants of Judah in the 7th–6th centuries BCE and consequently the historical development of the orthography of the Hebrew script, conclusions that should now be revised.

## 1. Introduction

The excavations conducted by Y. Shiloh in the City of David in Jerusalem during 1978–1985 unearthed the most impressive hoard of provenanced Hebrew bullae of the First Temple period known so far. The hoard, which was found in the stratum destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, comprises 51 bullae, 45

---

Daniel Vainstub, 2022. The Bullae of the Son of אוחל from the City of David. *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* 2: 120–129.

ISSN: 2788-8819; <https://doi.org/10.52486/01.00002.5>; <https://jjar.huji.ac.il>



of them bearing Hebrew inscriptions. The bullae were partially published by Shiloh (1985; 1986) and later by Shoham (1994), who went on to publish them in full (Shoham 1999; 2000).

The present study deals with two bullae from this corpus, both stamped by the same seal and numbered 29 and 30 in the abovementioned publications. Shiloh included the reading of bulla 29 in his preliminary publications (Shiloh 1985: 80; 1986: 29) without providing photographs or drawings. Shoham agreed with Shiloh's readings and published black-and-white photographs and excellent drawings of the two bullae (Shoham 1999; 2000). Good black-and-white photographs of both were also published by Avigad and Sass (1997: 183, nos. 437A, 437B).





## 2. The Published Reading of Bullae 29–30 and a Proposed New Reading

In the abovementioned publications, Shiloh and Shoham read the two bullae as לִאֱלִיקָם בֶּן אוֹהֶלֶל. Their reading was generally accepted and has been included in all the lexicons and corpora of Hebrew inscriptions.

### 2.1. Paleographic Review

The penultimate letter of the inscription was interpreted as a *he* without comment by the publishers. They only stated that all letters, other than the last of the first name, are clear (Shoham 1999: 161; Shoham 2000: 44). Scrutiny of the published photographs, however, should lead to the conclusion that this letter is not a *he* but a *het*: (1) Its general stance is that of a *het*; (2) although the roof was engraved after the right vertical, it lacks the frequent typical projection to the right of the roof of the *he*; and, above all, (3) the letter does, in fact, have the left vertical stroke of a *het*. The reason this stroke went unnoticed by the publishers is that the three horizontal strokes, which were executed after it, were very thick and superimposed it almost completely (Table 1). Only a slight trace of the vertical stroke's upper edge remains and can be discerned in the published photographs.

**Table 1. The sequence of strokes of the letter *het*.**

1	2	3	Final result
			

Even in the drawings published by Shoham, the letter looks like a *het*, but from the new color photographs of the bullae (commissioned for this article), its reading as *het* became clear. The left edges of the horizontal strokes end abruptly; they do not have the smoothly tapered end characteristic of other strokes in the seal's letters, as is also regularly the case with the horizontal strokes of a *he*. Scrutiny makes the reason clear: The engraver ended the strokes inside the "trench" of the left vertical stroke, obliterating it almost completely (Table 1). In the greatly enlarged photograph of bulla 30 (Fig. 1), the left "wall" of the trench can be discerned. If we follow the line of this wall upwards, we can clearly see that it projects very slightly past the top of the upper horizontal stroke. This tiny projection is the only fully surviving part of the left vertical stroke. In photographs of bulla 29 (Fig. 2), taken from different angles, one can see tiny pointed tips of the horizontal strokes on the other side of the vertical one. These tips were probably created when the horizontal strokes cut across the left vertical stroke, followed by the engraver lifting the stylus, leaving the observed tip on the far side of the vertical stroke. Notably, a similarly engraved *het* was engraved in the name חלקיהו on bulla 27.

**Fig. 1.** Bulla 30 (IAA 1984-162), 14 × 12 mm, Collection of the Israel Antiquities Authority.



**Fig. 2.** Bulla 29 (IAA 1984-161), 19 × 16 mm, lit from two different angles, Collection of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

## 2.2. The New Reading

לאליקם בן אוחל

“(belonging) to ’Elyāqīm son of ’*wḥl*”

In the Bible, אֱלִיקִים is the original name of Jehoiakim, king of Judah (2 Kgs 23:34; 2 Chr 36:4), of a minister contemporary with the prophet Isaiah (2 Kgs 18–19; Isa 22, 36–37), and of a priest of the Persian period (Neh 12:41). The name is also well attested epigraphically; spelled אליקם, as on our bullae, it was recorded eight more times throughout Judah, including Jerusalem (Golub 2021 and references therein).

The name אוחל, on the other hand, is not recorded in the Bible, and the bullae discussed here are its first documented occurrence in Hebrew epigraphy. It is built on the root *wḥl*. This root, usually with the first radical shifted *w > y*, is used more than forty times in the Bible to express expectation, hope, and anticipation, especially of a person from God. It possibly also occurs in the name יְהוֹאֵל (Gen 46:14 etc.). Although Hebrew personal names built on first-person verbs are unknown, in my opinion, everything points to the conclusion that the name on our bullae is built on the *Hiphil* first-person imperfect *'awḥīl* “I hope,” “I shall hope,” and may well be a hypocoristic form of *\*'awḥīlyāhu* or *\*yehō'awḥīl*, recalling the phrase אוחיל ליהוה (2 Kgs 6:33 and similar).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Vocalized אוחיל in the Masorah.

The name Uḥli-Yāma (<sup>m</sup>ú-uh-li-a-ma), reflecting the Hebrew אוּחְלִיָּהוּ, occurs in one of the tablets written in Akkadian from Al-Yahudu, a town of Jerusalemite exiles in Babylonia (Pearce and Wunsch 2014: 103, Tablet 4). In the tablet, a witness called Atal-Yāma (= עַתְלִיָּהוּ), son of Uḥli-Yāma (= אוּחְלִיָּהוּ), is mentioned.<sup>2</sup> The document is dated to 572 BCE, just fourteen years after the date of our bullae (Pearce and Wunsch 2014: 87, 296). Interestingly, Atalyahu, the deportee from Jerusalem, and Elyaqim, the contemporaneous owner of the seal that stamped our bullae, had fathers who most probably were inhabitants of Jerusalem bearing the same name, a very unusual one. We will never know if Atalyahu and Elyaqim were brothers or if this is merely a coincidence.

A less likely possibility is that the *aleph* of אוּחְלִי is prosthetic, as in names like אַפְרָח, which occurs on three other bullae from the City of David (nos. 9, 10, 17) and on an ostrakon from Ḥorbat ‘Uza (Beit-Arieh 2007: 150–152), or אַפְצָח, occurring in Samaria ostrakon no. 31. In this case, the name could have been given to a long-awaited child.

### 3. Implications of the Misreading of the Bullae

Misreading אוּחְלִ instead of אוּחְל is not an insignificant error in the reading of a single letter of a bulla without further ramifications. Rather, it led to a series of far-reaching conclusions concerning some aspects of Hebrew pronunciation in 7th–6th-century BCE Judah and, consequently, affected our understanding of the historical development of the Hebrew script’s orthography. The sequence of these conclusions can be summarized as follows.

Before the first publication of the two bullae in 1985, the indisputable use of *waw* as an internal *mater lectionis* in Hebrew inscriptions was known only for *ū* in the late 8th-century BCE “Royal Steward inscription” אַרְוֶר (Aḥituv 2008: 44–48) and onward, but not for Masoretic *o* or *ō* that does not originate in the diphthong *aw*. The use of *waw* as a *mater lectionis* for *o* or *ō* for such cases after the monophthongization *aw* > *ō* in the Judahite dialect,<sup>3</sup> whose most prominent advocate was Zevit (1980), remained controversial (see Gogel 1998: 65–69). One of the weakest points of this argument was its reliance on alleged *plene* spellings with *waw* for *o* in words whose roots are unclear, like שׁוּכָה or עׁפִי (Gogel 1998: 71 and references therein).

2 See in Pearce and Wunsch (2014: 87) the correct suggestion of Y. Bloch and the different opinion of R. Zadok, which suggest that the name reflects the root אוּחְלִ.

3 See a summary of the situation of the diphthongs in the different Hebrew dialects in Garr (2004: 38–40).

At that time, only three occurrences were said to include a *waw* as a *mater lectionis* for the vowels *o* or *ō*, without originating in the diphthong *aw* and deriving from known roots: two Hebrew seals bearing the names חורץ (Avigad and Sass 1997: no. 152, and references therein) and חונן (ibid., no. 1072, and references therein) and an Ammonite seal with the name שוחר (ibid., no. 865, and references therein).<sup>4</sup> All three seals are unprovenanced and of dubious origin. The *waw* in them supposedly represents the vowel *ō*, resulting from the “Canaanite shift”  $\bar{a} > \bar{o}$  in the *Qal* active participle. However, some researchers consider שוחר in the Ammonite seal to be an Egyptian name and the *waw* in it to be consonantal (Gogel 1998: 95). The publishers of the bullae from the City of David refer to these seals as precedents of what, in their eyes, was the now confirmed *plene* spelling of the vowel *o* in the name that they read אוהל (Shoham 1999: 161, 168; 2000: 44–45, 53).

Since אוהל became the generally accepted reading of our bullae, and since the reading of the unprovenanced seals was now supposedly confirmed (see Sarfatti 1994), reconstructions of a *mater lectionis waw* for *o* in partially preserved inscriptions were offered. The most notable of these is the inscription engraved on a pithos from the Ophel in Jerusalem. It was found at about the same time as the bullae (Mazar 1989; Nadelman 1989: 128–129)<sup>5</sup> and most probably dated to the 7th–6th century BCE (Renz 1995a: 272–273). Nadelman preferred the reconstruction לשר האון[פם] “(Belonging) to the chief of the ba[kers]” and also considered the reconstruction לשר האון[צר] “(Belonging) to the Minister of the Trea[sury]” as reasonable, despite Cross’s objection to the interpretation of the *waw* as a *mater lectionis* for  $\bar{a} > \bar{o}$ .<sup>6</sup> Another relevant example is the recently proposed reading of הצירור in Arad ostrakon 16 (Mendel-Geberovich et al. 2017: 114–118).

This small alleged corpus comprising one misread name, two or three unprovenanced seals, and several reconstructions had important implications for two fields: the linguistic and the epigraphic. In the field of linguistic research, this interpretation implies that the epigraphic data confirms that the monophthongization *aw* > *ō* in the Judahite dialect was fully realized no later than the 6th century BCE, leading to the interpretation of the letter spelled as *waw* but now pronounced *ō* as a *mater lectionis* for *ō*. In epigraphic research, it was deduced that the letter *waw* served as a *mater lectionis* not only for *ō* but also, by analogy, for *o*, as in the case of nouns originating in the pattern \**qutl* like

4 See Gogel (1998: 68–69, note 119) for a detailed treatment of the three seals with a full bibliography.

5 An excellent color photograph was published in Mazar (1989: 47).

6 Personal communication quoted in Nadelman (1989: 128–129). Though Renz accepted the publishers’ reading, he too objected to their interpretation of the *waw* as a *mater lectionis* for *ō* (Renz 1995a: 273–274, note 3).

'*ohel* on our bullae. Assuming that such a process must have taken some time, and considering that in the last generation of the Kingdom of Judah, the short *o* and the long *ō* not originating in the diphthong *aw* were already spelled in *plene*, it follows that the monophthongization must have occurred before this time, no later than the 7th century BCE.

#### 4. Conclusions

In view of the fact that אֹהֶל, the only fully preserved and provenanced example of *plene* spelling for *o*, was the result of a misreading, the tip of the inverted pyramid of conclusions described above has been removed, and the pyramid itself should be abandoned. One cannot rule out the possibility that the seals of חורק, חונק, and שׁוחר were made in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century by forgers who were unaware of the historical development of Ancient Hebrew phonology and orthography.<sup>7</sup> At the very least, so long as they remain the only occurrences of it, they cannot be considered precedents for reconstructing a *mater lectionis* *waw* for *o* in partly preserved inscriptions. Reconstructions such as לשר האון[פם/צר] or הצרור *haṣṣārūr* cannot be accepted. In the case of Arad ostrakon 16, if its proposed new reading is indeed correct, a passive participle *haṣṣārūr* can be considered. In the case of the inscription on the Ophel pithos, if the commonly accepted reading לשר האון is correct, a reconstruction that sees the *waw* as a *mater lectionis* for *ū* could be proposed, an option raised by the inscription's publishers themselves: לשר האון[רות] "(belonging) to the Minister of the Stables" (Mazar and Mazar 1989: 45; Nadelman 1989: 129). Likewise, one cannot rule out the possibility that the third letter in the inscription is not a *resh* but an intended, unsuccessfully executed *dalet* און לשרה "for the field of U[," U[ being a personal name. *Dalets* that lack the upper rightwards projection and with a long tail, which are very similar to the one of the Ophel pithos, are known from both the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms and date to the end of the 8th century BCE onwards.<sup>8</sup> Good examples are the sherd from Tel Kinrot כד השער (Ahituv 2008: 332) and the alphabetical אבגד from Lachish (Ussishkin 1978: 82, Pl. 26). Special attention should be paid to the inscribed jar handles from Gibeon (Pritchard 1959), where the engravers barely distinguished between *dalet* and *resh* and sometimes engraved long-tailed *dalets* of similar form to this letter on the Ophel pithos (ibid., nos. 11, 14).

7 On suspicions as early as the 1970s that the seal bearing the name חורק is a forgery, see Gogel (1998: 68–69, note 119).

8 See patterns h, m, and n in Renz (1995b: 117–121). I am grateful to the Bible Lands Museum, Jerusalem, for their kind help in checking the inscription in the museum.

In the proven Hebrew epigraphic data, there is, thus far, regardless of origin or length, not a single non-reconstructed example of a *plene* spelling of the vowel *o*. On the contrary, there is a relatively rich corpus of words in defective spelling that contain the vowel. This corpus includes dozens of cases of internal *o* or *ō* that did not originate in the diphthong *aw* and were rendered by different writers in different places during the last generation of the Kingdom of Judah. Among others, these cases include the Elyashib archive from Arad, the Lachish letters, and the City of David bullae themselves. Whenever an internal *waw* was written in a place where a Masoretic *ō* occurs, this *ō* had originated in the diphthong *aw*. Moreover, it is possible that the name Amuš-Yāma (<sup>m</sup>*a-mu-uš-a-ma*), borne by many Judean exiles recorded in both the Al-Yahudu and Murašū corpora (Pearce and Wunsch 2014: 39, 261, 308),<sup>9</sup> represents the name הושעיהו with the beginning “Am” reflecting the full pronunciation of the uncontracted diphthong *aw*.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, the earliest epigraphic evidence of a *mater lectionis waw* for *o* occurs in Paleo-Hebrew script on a coin of Yohanan the Priest minted in Jerusalem in the Persian period, in which the word “the priest” is spelled הכוהן (Barag 1986–1987; Meshorer 1997: 21–22, Pl. 3:20).<sup>11</sup> According to Barag, the coin was minted in the 4th century BCE.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the photographer Zohar Shemesh, who took the high-resolution photographs. I am also grateful to Yael Barschak (Head of Image Resources and Copyright Management) and Pirchia Eyal (Frieder Burda Curator of Iron Age and Persian Periods) of the Israel Museum for their kind help with the permission management. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments, which helped to improve the study. Likewise, I want to thank Susan Gorodetsky for her editing and improvement of my English.

9 On the preservation of Judahite theophoric elements in the names of exiles and their pronunciation, see Eph'al (2016: 12).

10 I am grateful to Dr. Yigal Bloch for discussing this point with me.

11 Only one exemplar of the coin has been found so far. In his article, Barag (Barag 1986–1987: 7) transcribed in defective spelling יחזני[ן] הכהן, although both the photograph and the drawing clearly demonstrate the *plene* spelling הכוהן (ibid. Pl. 1). Meshorer (1997) transcribed the text correctly.



## References

- Ahituv, S. 2008. *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period*. Jerusalem: Carta.
- Avigad, N. and Sass, B. 1997. *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, The Israel Exploration Society, and The Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Barag, D. 1986–1987. A Silver Coin of Yoḥanan the High Priest and the Coinage of Judea in the Fourth Century B.C. *Israel Numismatic Journal* 9: 4–21.
- Beit-Arieh, I. 2007. *Horvat 'Uza and Horvat Radum: Two Fortresses in the Biblical Negev*. Monograph Series of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University 25. Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology.
- Eph'al, I. 2016. The First Generations in Babylonian Exile: Onomastic Observations. *Eretz-Israel* 32: 11–15 (Hebrew).
- Garr, W. R. 2004. *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, 1000–586 B.C.E.* Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- Gogel, S. L. 1998. *A Grammar of Epigraphic Hebrew*. Atlanta GA: Scholars Press.
- Golub, M. R. 2021. *Onomasticon.net: Personal Names from the Iron II Southern Levant*. <http://www.onomasticon.net>.
- Mazar, E. 1989. Royal Gateway to Ancient Jerusalem Uncovered. *Biblical Archaeology Review* 15/3: 38–51.
- Mazar, E. and Mazar, B. 1989. *Excavations in the South of the Temple Mount*. Qedem 19. Jerusalem: The Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Mendel-Geberovich, A., Shaus, A., Faigenbaum-Golovin, S., Sober, B., Paisetzky, E., and Finkelstein, I. 2017. A Brand New Old Inscription: Arad Ostrakon 16 Rediscovered via Multispectral Imaging. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 378: 113–125.
- Meshorer, Y. 1997. *A Treasury of Jewish Coins from the Persian Period to Bar-Kokhba*. Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi (Hebrew).
- Nadelman, Y. 1989. Hebrew Inscriptions, Seal Inscriptions, and Markings of the Iron Age II. Pp. 128–141 in *Excavations in the South of the Temple Mount: The Ophel of Biblical Jerusalem*, eds. E. Mazar and B. Mazar B. Qedem 29. Jerusalem: The Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Pearce, L. E. and Wunsch, C. 2014. *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*. CUSAS 28. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press.
- Pritchard, J. B. 1959. *Hebrew Inscriptions and Stamps from Gibeon*. Philadelphia: The University Museum.
- Renz, J. 1995a. *Die Althebräischen Inschriften, Teil 1: Text und Kommentar, Band I*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Renz, J. 1995b. *Die Althebräischen Inschriften, Teil 2: Zusammenfassende Erörterungen, Paläographie und Glossar, Band II/1*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

- Sarfatti, G. B. 1994. Addenda to the Article “The Origin of Vowel Letters in West-Semitic Writing,” *Lěšonénu* 58 (1994), pp. 13–23. *Lěšonénu* 58: 275 (Hebrew).
- Shiloh, Y. 1985. A Hoard of Hebrew Bullae from the City of David. *Eretz-Israel* 18: 73–87, Plates 16–18 (Hebrew).
- Shiloh, Y. 1986. A Group of Hebrew Bullae from the City of David. *Israel Exploration Journal* 36: 16–38.
- Shoham, Y. 1994. A Group of Hebrew Bullae from Yigal Shiloh’s Excavations in the City of David. Pp. 55–61 in *Ancient Jerusalem Revealed*, ed. H. Geva. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society.
- Shoham, Y. 1999. Hebrew Bullae from the City of David. *Eretz-Israel* 26: 151–175 (Hebrew).
- Shoham, Y. 2000. Hebrew Bullae. Pp. 29–57 in *Excavations at the City of David 1978–1985 Directed by Yigal Shiloh*, Vol. VI: *Inscriptions*, ed. D. T. Ariel. Qedem 41. Jerusalem: The Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Ussishkin, D. 1978. Excavations at Tel Lachish—1973–1977: Preliminary Report. *Tel Aviv* 5: 1–91.
- Zevit, Z. 1980. *Matres Lectionis in Ancient Hebrew Epigraphs*. American Schools of Oriental Research Monograph Series 2. Cambridge, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research.