

The Jerubba'al Inscription from Khirbet al-Ra'i: A Proto-Canaanite (Early Alphabetic) Inscription

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Abstract

This article presents a Proto-Canaanite inscription written in ink on a jug. It was unearthed in 2019 at Khirbet al-Ra'i, located 4 km west of Tel Lachish, in a level dated to the late twelfth or early eleventh century BCE. Only part of the inscription had survived, with five letters indicating the personal name *Yrb'l* (Jerubba'al). This name also appears in the biblical tradition, more or less in the same era: "[Gideon] from that day was called *Yrb'l*" (Judg. 6:31–32). This inscription, together with similar inscriptions from Beth-Shemesh and Khirbet Qeiyafa, contributes to a better understanding of the distribution of theophoric names with the element *ba'al* in the eleventh–tenth centuries BCE in Judah.

KEYWORDS: Proto-Canaanite inscription, Jerubba'al, Khirbet al-Ra'i

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1. The Site and Context of the Inscription

Khirbet al-Ra'i is a relatively small site (1.7 hectares) located 4 km west of Tel Lachish at the western edge of the Judean Shephelah on a hill above the south bank of Nahal Lachish (Fig. 1). In October 2015 we conducted a small-scale testing project lasting five days. Since then we have excavated annually at the site for three or six weeks (Garfinkel and Ganor 2018, 2019; Garfinkel et al. 2019a, 2019b).



Fig. 1. Map of the Shephelah region and the location of sites mentioned in the text.

Four excavation areas (A–D) have been opened at Khirbet al-Ra'i. Three of them are located on the edges of the site (Area A in the south, Area B in the east and Area C in the north), while Area D is located in the centre of the site, at the highest point. In the Iron Age I, the period relevant to the inscription, Area A is characterized by simple dwellings, in Area B the remains of massive architecture have been unearthed, Area C is located beyond the settlement, and Area D contains large monumental buildings (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Aerial photograph of Khirbet al-Ra'i. Area A is located on the left.

In Area A the excavation focused largely on the late Iron Age I level that appeared almost immediately under the topsoil (Fig. 3). Its date, the second half of the eleventh century BCE, was determined by the pottery assemblage and radiometric dating (Garfinkel et al. 2019a, 2019b). In the 2019 season, we opened a small probe in the south-eastern side of Area A and identified an earlier occupation phase. Judging by the pottery assemblage, this phase too is of the Iron Age I, and hence should date from the late twelfth or first half of the eleventh century BCE. Part of stone-lined Silo A310 was revealed in the south-eastern corner of the probe, and all the sediment inside was sifted. On the last day of the season two small pottery sherds bearing letters were discovered.



Fig. 3. Aerial photograph of Area A at the end of the 2019 excavation season. The rectangular probe in which the inscription was found is marked by white sandbags on the lower right (with working people inside).

In the 2020 field season we enlarged the probe to expose the entire silo and its immediate surroundings, finding an additional, third fragment during sifting of the entire contents of the silo (Fig. 4). It became clear that at some time during the earlier Iron Age I phase the silo went out of use and became a dumping site for household rubbish. Only small sherds, but no complete pottery vessels, were found.

The entire pottery assemblage from the probe was examined by Adrienne Ganor, an expert on pottery restoration at the Israel Antiquities Authority. No additional pottery sherds that could be joined with the inscription fragments were recognised. Examination of the inscribed pottery sherds and the ink indicated that all three sherds belonged to the same vessel. It was a small closed container, perhaps a jug, that was painted, burnished and then fired in a potter's kiln.



Fig. 4. Stone-lined Silo A310, in which the inscription was found at the end of the 2020 excavation season.

The pottery assemblage from the silo includes a few hundred sherds, representing simple daily vessels, that characterized the 12-11 centuries BCE in the region. Figures 5-6 present the best examples of the main types.

Bowls. Medium size bowls of various outline constitute the majority of the pottery. There are four different types:

1. Rounded body, with shallow profile (Fig. 5:1–2).
2. Rounded body and deep profile. Here there are simple undecorated bowls (Fig. 5:3–5), bowls made from whitish clay (Fig. 5:6–8), and decorated items (Fig. 5:9–11).
3. Carinated Sima bowls. These usually have a shallow body with emphasized carination in the upper part of the vessel (Fig. 5:12–13). The bowls are often decorated with red band near the rim. More elaborate items were decorated with wavy line between two straight parallel lines, and sometimes with a palm tree.
4. Bell-Shaped bowl. These have deep rounded curve body and a delicate carination near the rim (Fig. 5:14–16). One small handle fragment is well-carved and decorated with small red triangles (Fig. 5:17).

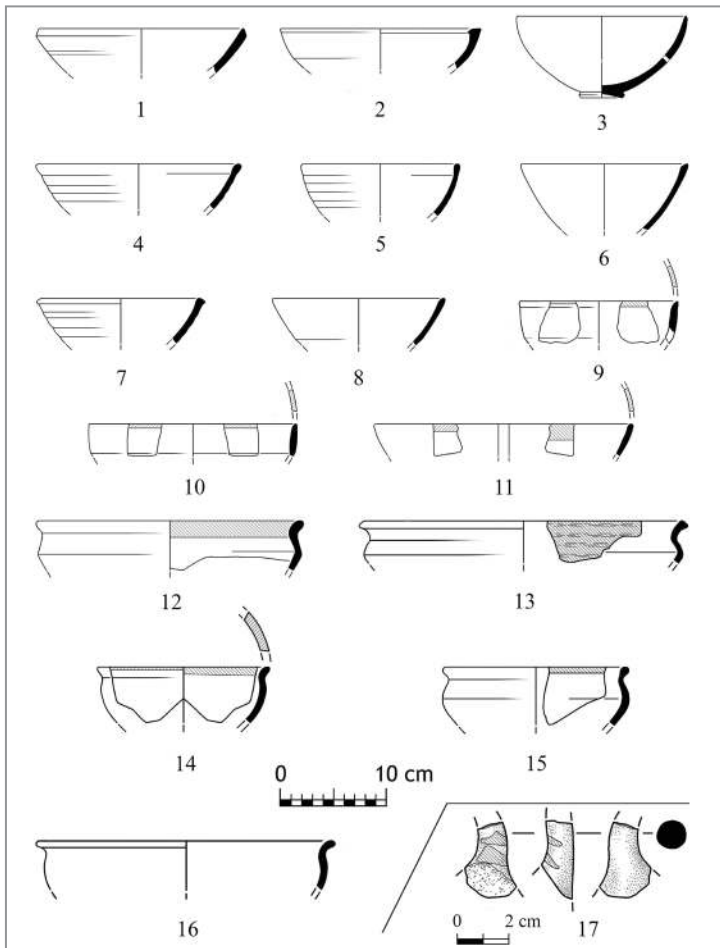


Fig. 5. Representative sample of pottery sherds from Silo A310

Figure 5. Pottery from Locus 310

No	Locus	Bucket	Typology	Note
1	322	3157	Bowl: rounded shallow	
2	335	2251	Bowl: rounded shallow	
3	324	2146	Bowl: rounded, deep	
4	327	2157	Bowl: rounded, deep	
5	327	2172	Bowl: rounded, deep	
6	327	2180	Bowl: rounded, deep	Whitish clay
7	327	2190	Bowl: rounded, deep	Whitish clay
8	335	2248	Bowl: rounded, deep	Whitish clay
9	327	2172	Bowl: rounded, deep	Red painted band on rim
10	327	2172	Bowl: rounded, deep	Red painted band on rim
11	327	2207	Bowl: rounded, deep	Red painted band on rim
12	324	2150	Carinated Sima bowls	Red painted band on rim
13	327	2172	Carinated Sima bowls	Burnished inside, no paint
14	324	2150	Bell-Shaped bowl	Red painted band on rim
15	309	2089	Bell-Shaped bowl	Red painted band on rim
16	324	2150	Bell-Shaped bowl	
17	335	2251	Bell-Shaped bowl	Handle fragment, red paint

Kraters. The kraters are characterized by emphasized rim, thickening to both sides (Fig. 6:1–2).

Cooking Pots. A few fragments were found. One of them is characterized by a rectangular grooved rim (Fig. 6:3). The rectangular grooved rim is a regional type that characterized the late Canaanite levels at nearby Lachish. This, CP-5 type at Lachish, had been described as "the most common type of cooking-pot found in Levels VII-VI" (Yannai 2004:1047).

Juglets and Jugs. A few small rim fragments of juglets and jugs were found, of local Canaanite tradition.

Storage jars. This type is represented by rim fragments (Fig. 6:4–5), body fragments, large handles and massive bases (Fig. 6:6-8).

This is a simple assemblage of domestic rubbish, that was dumped into the silo after it came out of use. From chronological point of view, the bell-shaped bowls is the most characteristic type. This type of bowl was not found at all in Lachish Level VI, and thus dated Silo A310 to the second half of the 12th and the 11th centuries BCE. The handle fragments characterized the more elaborate type of

bell-shape bowls. The stratigraphic position of the silo under the upper Iron Age I level, radiometrically dated to ca. 1050 BCE, place it between 1150-1050 BCE.

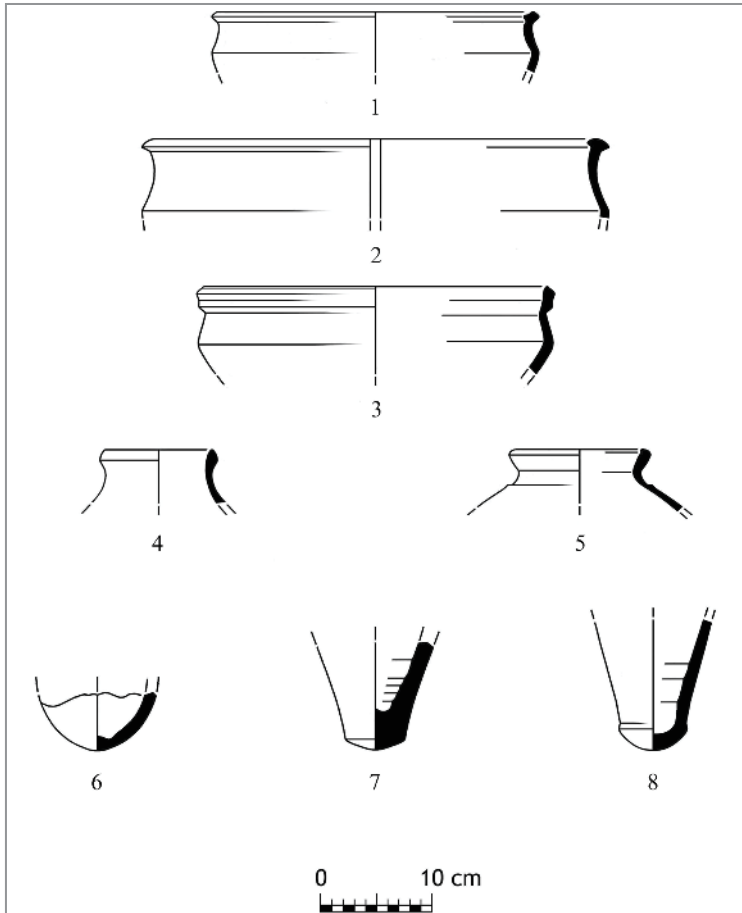


Fig. 6. Representative sample of pottery sherds from Silo A310

No	Locus	Bucket	Typology	Note
1	309	2089	Krater	
2	335	2248	Krater	
3	335	2248	Cooking Pot	Rectangular rim
4	327	2172	Storage jar	
5	335	2248	Storage jar	
6	309	2089	Storage jar	Base
7	227	2172	Storage jar	Base
8	324	2140	Storage jar	Base

2. The Inscription (Figs. 7–8)

The inscription was written in Proto-Canaanite (a script which can also be referred to as Early Alphabetic, or just Canaanite). It is written in brown ink on pottery. Three pottery fragments with letters, or traces of letters, were recovered, with a total of eight letters. While two of the sherds join together well, the third fragment does not form a join, and thus it is not clear if it was located to the left or the right of the other two sherds. The join of the two joinable pottery fragments is certain; the pottery itself fits together precisely and yields a perfect and complete dotted 'ayin. On the two joined pottery fragments, five letters are decipherable, although the first letter is not fully preserved. The second through fifth letters are clear and can be read as follows: *reš*, *bet*, 'ayin, *lamed*. As for the first letter, we understand the traces to be most consistent with those of a *yod* (see below). It seems most reasonable to contend that the inscription is written sinistrowise (see below). Thus, the letters can be read *Yrb'l*, making, arguably, the personal name Jerubba'al.¹ Traces of an unconnected sixth letter are visible on the joined sherds, but not enough to posit a reliable reading. Furthermore, traces of two additional letters are visible on the third sherd fragment, but not enough to posit a cogent reading (the curvature of these letters creates possibilities such as traces of an 'ayin, or *bet*, or *lamed*, *tet*, etc., but nothing can be posited with any certitude at all). The palaeographic date of this inscription (see below for brief discussion) is entirely consistent with the date of the archaeological context, that is, the late twelfth or early eleventh century BCE.



Fig. 7. Photograph of the inscription (by Dafna Gazit, the Israel Antiquities Authority).

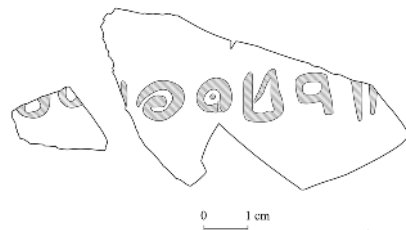


Fig. 8. Drawing of the inscription (by Olga Dobovsky).

¹ In this connection, it is useful to mention that internal *matres lectionis* were not used in Proto-Canaanite inscriptions (or even in Early Old Hebrew inscriptions), and therefore there is no *vav* to mark the /u/ vowel (see Rollston 2006: 61–65). Moreover, note the presence of a *dagesh forte* in the *bet* of the Masoretic Text's pointing of this personal name, that is, the *bet* is doing double duty (signifying the *bet* of the verbal root as well as the first letter of the personal name) in both the inscription and in the Masoretic text.

2.1. The Name

The personal name Jerubba'al is attested in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Judg 6:31–32). Note that while in the Hebrew Bible the patronymic *Yw's* (Yoash) is present, no patronymic appears on the Khirbet al-Ra'i inscription. It would be tempting to posit that this inscription is that of the biblical figure. After all, the chronological framework for this figure is the period of the Judges, and so a time frame for him in the twelfth or eleventh century BCE (the date of the inscription) is entirely plausible. Nevertheless, as Mykytiuk has rightly emphasised (building on the foundational work of Nahman Avigad), for the identification of a figure from the Bible and the epigraphic record to be compelling, the presence of a patronymic, title, or epithet (etc.) is necessary, even when the putative biblical and archaeological time frames seem to correspond fairly nicely (Mykytiuk 2004: 32).²

This personal name arguably consists of two root words: the theophoric element *b'l* and the verbal root *rby* (or *rbb*). Note, for example, that this is the manner in which Noth understands the occurrence of this personal name in the Hebrew Bible, with the basic meaning of 'May Ba'al be great' (Noth 1928: 206–207). The same verbal root is also operative in names such as *Yrb'm* (i.e., Jeroboam, 1 Kgs 11:26, 2 Kgs 13:13; in the case of this name, with the preformative form of the verb). Various Semitic languages have personal names with this root (e.g., for Ugaritic, see Gröndahl 1967: 178–179; for Amorite, see Huffmon 1965: 260; for Akkadian, see Baker 2002: 1027; for a Byblian in Amarna Akkadian, see Hess 1993: 130; for Palmyrene, see Stark 1971: 111). There is a folk etymology in the Hebrew Bible in which the root *ryb* (meaning, for example, 'to contend', 'strive', 'engage in a lawsuit') is presupposed to be the operative verbal root. The narrative about this is particularly interesting because of Gideon's nickname *Yrb'l*, given to him after his father Joash, defending Gideon from the men of the city who desired to kill him because he destroyed an altar of Ba'al, says: 'Let Ba'al contend against him.' The narrative then states: '(Gideon) from that day was called *Yrb'l*' (Judg. 6:31–32; cf. Gordon 1965: 2330).³ Nevertheless, Noth convincingly demonstrates that this personal name (and also the personal name *Yrb'm*, Jeroboam), "nichts mit dem Verbum *ryb* zu

2 The biblical Gideon (Jerubba'al) is said to hail from Ophrah of Manasseh (Judg 6:11). Although this is not the same region as Khirbet al-Ra'i, it is not that distant.

3 On the phenomenon of naming, including the usage of 'nicknames', see Rollston 2013: 367–369, especially note 8. The name Jerubba'al occurs several times in Judges (e.g., 7:1; 8:29, 35; 9:1–57 passim). Particularly interesting is the pejorative form of this name, in which *bešet* ('shame') is used in place of the theophoric element Ba'al, yielding Jerubbesheth (2 Sam 11:21). On the usage of pejorative personal names, see Rollston 2013, especially 377–382, with discussion and bibliography regarding Saul's son Ishba'al (2 Sam 2:8–4:12 and 1 Chr 8:33; 9:39; 1 Chr 11:11) and the usage of the pejorative Ishbosheth.

tun haben" ('have nothing to do with the verb *ryb*'; but cf. Gordon 1965: 2330 for a different etymology for the name). It is also useful to emphasise that this personal name, both in the Bible and in our inscription, falls into the category of verbal sentence-names, that is, personal names consisting of a verb and a subject (stated or not).

The Ba'al theophoric is well attested in various Semitic languages, including Ugaritic (Gröndahl 1967: 78, 81–82), Phoenician (e.g., Benz 1972: 90–100, including the bronze 'Azar-Ba'l inscription, discussed in Rollston 2010: 20), Hebrew (e.g., Noth 1928: 114–122; Rechenmacher 2012: 105), Akkadian (Radner 1999: 279–340, spelled *Bēl* because of the phonological and orthographic conventions of Akkadian), Amarna Akkadian (e.g., Hess 1993: 4856) and Amorite (e.g., Huffmon 1965: 100, 174–175), as well as in the broader corpus of Proto-Canaanite inscriptions (e.g., the Qeiyafa ostrakon, Misgav, Garfinkel and Ganor 2009: 111–123; the Qeiyafa 'Išba'al inscription, Garfinkel et al. 2015: 217–233; the Ba'al inscription from Beth-Shemesh, McCarter, Bunimovitz and Lederman 2011: 35–49); and some of the Proto-Canaanite bronze arrowheads (in McCarter 1999: 123–128 and literature there).

It is useful and important to emphasise that Ba'al is an epithet meaning 'lord' or 'master', and at least early on in Israelite religion was an acceptable manner of referring to Yahweh, the national God of Israel (Tigay 1986: 68–69 and literature; Tigay 1987). This is reflected in an especially convincing fashion in the biblical personal name Ba'alyah, meaning literally 'Yahweh is Ba'al' (1 Chr 12:6), as well as the usage in the Old Hebrew Samaria Ostraca (early eighth century BCE). Later in Israelite and Judean religion, however, it became associated especially with the Canaanite deity, and so essentially ceased to be considered an acceptable epithet for Yahweh (for discussion and literature, see Rollston 2013: 380–382; Golub 2017: 39–41, Tables 1–2; Garfinkel et al. 2015: 230).

2.2. The Script

The script of the Khirbet al-Ra'i inscription is Proto-Canaanite (=Early Alphabetic), as demonstrated by the morphology and stance of the letters. That is to say, it is not written in the standardised script of Early Byblian Phoenician or Old Hebrew. The Proto-Canaanite script is attested as early as the nineteenth or eighteenth century BCE. It persisted for centuries, but began to be supplanted by the mid to late eleventh century with the beginning of the Early Phoenician script (Naveh 1987: 41–42; Rollston 2010: 18–20 and bibliography there). Nevertheless, Proto-Canaanite did persist in certain pockets of the southern

Levant into the tenth century BCE (for discussion and bibliography, see Rollston 2019: 373–378, 385).

The Khirbet al-Ra'i inscription is a fine example of Proto-Canaanite script. The direction of writing is arguably sinistroke (the stance of the *reš* makes it difficult to posit the assumption of dextrograde writing, although reading it in that direction could yield a personal name based on the ethnicon 'br, that is, 'bry, preceded by a prepositional *lamed*). The script is nicely written on a horizontal plane, following the contours of the wheelmarks on the pottery. The writing is smooth, the strokes are nicely drawn on the pottery, the ductus is clear, almost elegant, and the size of the letters is consistent. This is the hand of a trained scribe.

The head of the *reš* is angular and the leg is fairly short (i.e., it does not drop far below the bottom horizontal of the head). If this were the only letter present, someone might posit that the script is Phoenician, but it is not, because, for example, of the stance of the *bet* and *lamed*. The *bet* is rotated 90° clockwise from the standard stance of the Phoenician script (as well as the Old Hebrew script, which derived from the Phoenician script). The stance of the *bet* in Proto-Canaanite reflects substantial variation, and hence this is not surprising in our inscription. The 'ayin of our inscription has the dot, that is, the 'pupil of the eye', a sterling relic of the original pictographic form of the 'ayin (which literally means 'eye' in Semitic). Normally, the presence of the dot in the 'ayin is quite correctly considered an archaic feature in many inscriptions, including the Kefar Veradim bowl inscription, although it is notably absent in the Proto-Canaanite Beth-Shemesh inscription from the 2001 excavations. It is sometimes preserved in an archaizing script (such as that of the ninth-century Tell Fakhariyeh Bilingual) even after it had generally fallen into disuse (Rollston 2008: 88–91). In any case, based on the archaeological context of the Khirbet al-Ra'i inscription, the presence of the dot in the 'ayin is most readily understood as a feature reflective of the Proto-Canaanite script. Furthermore, the *lamed* of this inscription is another form that reflects rather nicely the Proto-Canaanite script (i.e., a tightly curled form). Notice that a *lamed* with very similar morphology is present on the Qubur Walaydah inscription, but that inscription is written dextrograde and so is the mirror image of the Khirbet al-Ra'i inscription. After the *lamed*, there are traces of an additional letter or perhaps a word divider. But since the traces are so meagre, it is prudent not to speculate about it.

3. Discussion

1. The Reading. It is important to discuss the very first letter of the inscription, the letter which we are reading as a *yod*. As we have noted, the letter is not fully preserved, but the traces are consistent with those of a *yod*, with a morphology quite similar, for example, to that of the Lachish ewer (for a very useful script chart of Proto-Canaanite, including this letter, see Cross 1980: 16). It would be possible to posit that the traces might be those of an *'aleph*, and that would yield an acceptable meaning (e.g., with the theophoric element Ba'al and the root *nwr*, 'light'; cf. Noth 1928: 167–169; Benz 1972: 63). Moreover, someone might also posit reading these traces as an *ed* (*d*) (for discussion of this letter in Proto-Canaanite, see Hamilton 2006: 147–154). But all things considered, the reading of *yod* is ultimately preferable.

2. The Direction of Writing. Someone might posit reading the entire inscription dextrograde. This is not impossible, and could be understood to yield (after the traces on the left side of the sherd) a prepositional lamed and a personal name or ethnicon of some sort *'bry* (with the *yod* perhaps functioning as a hypocoristic). Nevertheless, the stance of the letters present does seem to us to be reflective of sinistrograde, not dextrograde, writing. In sum, the reading with which we are most comfortable is *Yrb'l*.

3. Chronology. The Khirbet al-Ra'i inscription came from a secure archaeological context dating from the late twelfth or early eleventh century BCE. The archaeological context and the palaeographic dating are consistent with one another.

4. Geography. More Canaanite alphabetic inscriptions have been found at Late Bronze Age Lachish in the Shephelah than at any other site in southern Canaan. This includes seven inscriptions uncovered by Starkey's expedition (Puech 1986; Sass 1988), one inscription from Ussishkin's excavations (Lemaire 2004) and an inscription found by the Fourth Expedition to Lachish (Sass et al. 2015). Later Canaanite inscriptions of the Iron Age IIA (the tenth century BCE) have been found at several sites in the Shephelah: two at Beth-Shemesh (Cross 1967: 17–18; McCarter, Bunimovitz and Lederman 2011), one at Tell es-Safi (Maier et al. 2008) and two at Khirbet Qeiyafa (Misgav, Garfinkel and Ganor 2009; Garfinkel et al. 2015). Previously, no Iron Age I inscription had been found to bridge the gap between the Late Bronze and the Iron Age IIA. The Khirbet al-Ra'i inscription is now the missing link between the two periods in the Shephelah.

5. The Onomastic Aspect. The personal name Jerubba'al joins the 'Išba'al inscription from Khirbet Qeiyafa (Garfinkel et al. 2015) and the Ba'al inscription from Beth-Shemesh (McCarter, Bunimovitz and Lederman 2011).

While theophoric names with the element *ba'al* occur in Judah in both the biblical tradition and epigraphic sources of the eleventh–tenth centuries BCE, this element disappears from the biblical text and from the epigraphic record between the ninth and sixth centuries BCE (Golub 2017; Garfinkel et al. 2018: 211–214). The chronological correlation between the biblical tradition and ancient Judean inscriptions indicates that the biblical text preserves authentic Judean onomastic traditions.

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